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To Bring Out
The Beast

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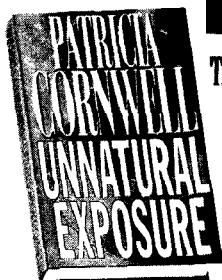
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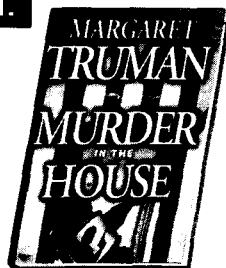
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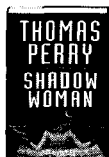
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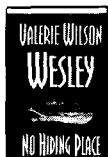
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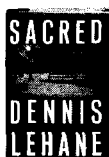
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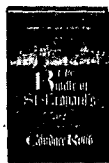
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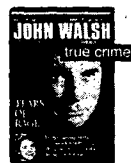
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FICTION



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HEADACHES AND BAD DREAMS

by Lawrence Block

Three days of headaches, three nights of bad dreams. On the third night she woke twice before dawn, her heart racing, the bedding sweat-soaked. The second time she forced herself up and out of bed and into the shower. Before she'd toweled dry the headache had begun, starting at the base of the skull and radiating to the temples.

She took aspirin. She didn't like to take drugs of any sort, and her medicine cabinet contained nothing but a few herbal preparations—echinacea and goldenseal for colds, ginkgo for memory, and a Chinese herbal tonic, its ingredients a mystery to her, which she ordered by mail from a firm in San Francisco. She took sage, too,

because it seemed to her to help center her psychically and make her perceptions more acute, although she couldn't remember having read that it had that property. She grew sage in her garden, picked leaves periodically and dried them in the sun, and drank a cup of sage tea almost every evening.

There were herbs that were supposed to ease headaches, no end of different herbs for the many different kinds of headaches, but she'd never found one that worked. Aspirin, on the other hand, was reliable. It was a drug, and as such it probably had the effect of dulling her psychic abilities, but those abilities were of small value when your head was throbbing like Poe's telltale heart. And aspirin didn't slam shut the doors of perception, as something strong might do. Truth to tell, it was the nearest thing to an herb itself, obtained originally from willow bark. She didn't know how they made it nowadays, surely there weren't willow trees enough on the planet to cure the world's headaches, but still . . .

She heated a cup of spring water, added the juice of half a lemon. That was her breakfast. She sipped it in the garden, listening to the birds.

She knew what she had to do but she was afraid.

It was a small house, just two bedrooms, everything on one floor, with no basement and a shallow crawl space for an attic. She slept in one bedroom and saw clients in the other. A beaded curtain hung in the doorway of the second bedroom, and within were all the pictures and talismans and power objects from which she drew strength. There were religious pictures and statues, a crucifix, a little bronze Buddha, African masks, quartz crystals. A pack of tarot cards shared a small table with a little malachite pyramid and a necklace of bear claws.

A worn oriental rug covered most of the floor, and was itself in part covered by a smaller rug on which she would lie when she

One of the great contemporary masters of the crime story, Lawrence Sanders claimed three Edgar nominations and an Edgar award for best short story in the early '90s. Even outside the crime genre, his stories are widely anthologized. His new tale for us will also appear in *The Best of the Best*, a book celebrating the 50th anniversary of Signet paperbacks. †

went into trance. The rest of the time she would sit in the straight-backed armchair. There was a chaise as well, and that was where the client would sit.

She had only one appointment that day, but it was right smack in the middle of the day. The client, Claire Warburton, liked to come on her lunch hour. So Sylvia got through the morning by watching talk shows on television and paging through old magazines, taking more aspirin when the headache threatened to return. At twelve-thirty she opened the door for her client.

Claire Warburton was a regular, coming for a reading once every four or five weeks, upping the frequency of her visits in times of stress. She had a weight problem—that was one of the reasons she liked to come on her lunch hour, so as to spare herself a meal's worth of calories—and she was having a lingering affair with a married man. She had occasional problems at work as well, a conflict with a new supervisor, an awkward situation with a coworker who disapproved of her love affair. There were always topics on which Claire needed counsel, and, assisted by the cards, the crystals, and her own inner resources, Sylvia always found something to tell her.

"Oh, before I forget," Claire said, "you were absolutely right about wheat. I cut it out and I felt the difference almost immediately."

"I thought you would. That came through loud and clear last time."

"I told Dr. Greenleaf. 'I think I may be allergic to wheat,' I said. He rolled his eyes."

"I'll bet he did. I hope you didn't tell him where the thought came from."

"Oh, sure. 'Sylvia Belgrave scanned my reflex centers with a green pyramid and picked up a wheat allergy.' Believe me, I know better than that. I don't know why I bothered to say anything to him in the first place. I suppose I was looking for male approval, but that's nothing new, is it?" They discussed the point, and then she said, "But it's so hard, you know. Staying away from wheat, I mean. It's everywhere."

"Yes."

"Bread, pasta. I wish I could cut it out completely, but I've managed to cut way down, and it helps. Sylvia? Are you all right?"

"A headache. It keeps coming back."

"Really? Well, I hate to say it, but do you think maybe you ought to see a doctor?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I know the cause, and I even know the cure. There's something I have to do."

When Sylvia was nineteen years old, she fell in love with a young man named Gordon Sawyer. He had just started dental school, and they had an understanding; after he had qualified as a dentist, they would get married. They were not officially engaged, she did not have a ring, but they had already reached the stage of talking about names for their children.

He drowned on a family canoe trip. A couple of hours after it happened, but long before anybody could get word to her, Sylvia awoke from a nightmare bathed in perspiration. The details of the dream had fled, but she knew it had been awful, and that something terrible had happened to Gordon. She couldn't go back to sleep, and she had been up for hours with an unendurable headache when the doorbell rang and a cousin of Gordon's brought the bad news.

That was her first undeniable psychic experience. Before that she'd had feelings and hunches, twinges of perception that were easy to shrug off or blink away. Once a fortuneteller at a county fair had read her palm and told her she had psychic powers herself, powers she'd be well advised to develop. She and Gordon had laughed about it, and he'd offered to buy her a crystal ball for her birthday.

When Gordon died her life found a new direction. If Gordon had lived she'd have gone on working as a salesgirl until she became a full-time wife and mother. Instead, she withdrew into herself and began following the promptings of an inner voice. She could walk into a bookstore and her feet would lead her to some arcane volume that would turn out to be just what she needed to study next. She would sit in her room in her parents' house, staring for hours at a candle flame, or at her own reflection in the mirror. Her parents were worried, but nobody did anything beyond urging her to get out more and meet people. She was upset over Gordon's death, they agreed, and that was understandable, and she would get over it.

"Twenty-five dollars," Claire Warburton said, handing over two tens and a five. "You know, I was reading about this woman in *People* magazine, she reads the cards for either Oprah or Madonna, don't ask me which. And do you know how much she gets for a session?"

"Probably more than twenty-five dollars," Sylvia said.

"They didn't say, but they showed the car she drives around in. It's got an Italian name that sounds like testosterone, and it's fire-engine red, naturally. Of course, that's California. People in this town think you'd have to be crazy to pay twenty-five dollars. I don't see how you get by, Sylvia, I swear I don't."

"There was what my mother left," she said. "And the insurance."

"And a good thing, but it won't last forever. Can't you—"

"What?"

"Well, look into the crystal and try to see the stock market? Or ask your spirit guides for investment advice?"

"It doesn't work that way."

"That's what I knew you'd say," Claire said. "I guess that's what everybody says: You can't use it for your own benefit or it doesn't work."

"That's as it should be," she said. "It's a gift, and the universe doesn't necessarily give you what you want. But you have to keep it. No exchanges, no refunds."

She parked across the street from the police station, turned off the engine, and sat in the car for a few moments, gathering herself. Her car was not a red Testarossa but a six-year-old Ford Tempo. It ran well, got good mileage, and took her where she wanted to go. What more could you ask of a car?

Inside, she talked to two uniformed officers before she wound up on the other side of a desk from a balding man with gentle brown eyes that belied his jutting chin. He was a detective, and his name was Norman Jeffcote.

He looked at her card, then looked directly at her. Twenty years had passed since her psychic powers had awakened with her fiancé's death, and she knew that the years had not enhanced her outward appearance. Then she'd been a girl with regular features turned pretty by her vital energy, a petite and slender creature, and now she was a little brown-haired mouse, dumpy and dowdy.

"Psychic counseling," he read aloud. "What's that exactly, Ms. Belgrave?"

"Sometimes I sense things," she said.

"And you think you can help us with the Sporrán kid?"

"That poor little girl," she said.

Melissa Sporrán, six years old, only child of divorced parents,

had disappeared eight days previously on her way home from school.

"The mother broke down on camera," Detective Jeffcote said, "and I guess it got to people, so much so that it made some of the national newscasts. That kind of coverage pulls people out of the woodwork. I got a woman on the phone from Chicago, telling me she just knows little Melissa's in a cave at the foot of a waterfall. She's alive, but in great danger. You're a local woman, Ms. Belgrave. You know any waterfalls within a hundred miles of here?"

"No."

"Neither do I. This woman in Chicago, she may have been a little fuzzy on the geography, but she was good at making sure I got her name spelled right. But I won't have a problem in your case, will I? Because your name's all written out on your card."

"You're not impressed with psychic phenomena," she said.

"I think you people got a pretty good racket going," he said, "and more power to you if you can find people who want to shell out for whatever it is you're selling. But I've got a murder investigation to run, and I don't appreciate a lot of people with four-leaf clovers and crystal balls."

"Maybe I shouldn't have come," she said.

"Well, that's not for me to say, Ms. Belgrave, but now that you bring it up—"

"No," she said. "I didn't have any choice. Detective, have you heard of Sir Isaac Newton?"

"Sure, but I probably don't know him as well as you do. Not if you're getting messages from him."

"He was the foremost scientific thinker of his time," she said, "and in his later years he became quite devoted to astrology, which you may take as evidence either of his open-mindedness or of encroaching senility, as you prefer."

"I don't see what this has to—"

"A colleague chided him," she said, brooking no interruption, "and made light of his enthusiasm, and do you know what Newton said? 'Sir, I have investigated the subject. You have not. I do not propose to waste my time discussing it with you.'"

He looked at her and she returned his gaze. After a long moment he said, "All right, maybe you and Sir Isaac have a point. You got a hunch about the Sporrán kid?"

"Not a hunch," she said, and explained the dreams, the

headaches. "I believe I'm linked to her," she said, "however it works, and I don't begin to understand how it works. I think . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid I think she's dead."

"Yes," Jeffcote said heavily. "Well, I hate to say it, but you gain in credibility with that one, Ms. Belgrave. We think so, too."

"If I could put my hands on some object she owned, or a garment she wore . . ."

"You and the dogs." She looked at him. "There was a fellow with a pack of bloodhounds, needed something of hers to get the scent. Her mother gave us this little sunsuit, hadn't been laundered since she wore it last. The dogs got the scent good, but they couldn't pick it up anywhere. I think we still have it. You wait here."

He came back with the garment in a plastic bag, drew it out, and wrinkled his nose at it. "Smells of dog now," he said. "Does that ruin it for you?"

"The scent's immaterial," she said. "It shouldn't even matter if it's been laundered. May I?"

"You need anything special, Ms. Belgrave? The lights out, or candles lit, or—"

She shook her head, told him he could stay, motioned for him to sit down. She took the child's sunsuit in her hands and closed her eyes and began to breathe deeply, and almost at once her mind began to fill with images. She saw the girl, saw her face, and recognized it from dreams she thought she had forgotten.

She felt things, too. Fear, mostly, and pain, and more fear, and then, at the end, more pain.

"She's dead," she said softly, her eyes still closed. "He strangled her."

"He?"

"I can't see what he looks like. Just impressions." She waved a hand in the air, as if to dispel clouds, then extended her arm and pointed. "That direction," she said.

"You're pointing southeast."

"Out of town," she said. "There's a white church off by itself. Beyond that there's a farm." She could see it from on high, as if she were hovering overhead, like a bird making lazy circles in the sky. "I think it's abandoned. The barn's unpainted and deserted. The house has broken windows."

"There's the Baptist church on Reistertown Road. A plain white

building with a little steeple. And out beyond it there's the Petty farm. She moved into town when the old man died."

"It's abandoned," she said, "but the fields don't seem to be overgrown. That's strange, isn't it?"

"Definitely the Petty farm," he said, his voice quickening. "She let the grazing when she moved."

"Is there a silo?"

"Seems to me they kept a dairy herd. There'd have to be a silo."

"Look in the silo," she said.

She was studying Detective Jeffcote's palm when the call came. She had already told him he was worried about losing his hair, and that there was nothing he could do about it, that it was inevitable. The inevitability was written in his hand, although she'd sensed it the moment she saw him, just as she had at once sensed his concern. You didn't need to be psychic for that, though. It was immediately evident in the way he'd grown his remaining hair long and combed it to hide the bald spot.

"You should have it cut short," she said. "Very short. A crew cut, in fact."

"I do that," he said, "and everybody'll be able to see how thin it's getting."

"They won't notice," she told him. "The shorter it is, the less attention it draws. Short hair will empower you."

"Wasn't it the other way around with Samson?"

"It will strengthen you," she said. "Inside and out."

"And you can tell all that just looking at my hand?"

She could tell all that just looking at his head, but she only smiled and nodded. Then she noticed an interesting configuration in his palm and told him about it, making some dietary suggestions based on what she saw. She stopped talking when the phone rang, and he reached to answer it.

He listened for a long moment, then covered the mouthpiece with the very palm she'd been reading. "You were right," he said. "In the silo, covered up with old silage. They wouldn't have found her if they hadn't known to look for her. And the smell of the fermented silage masked the smell of the, uh, decomposition."

He put the phone to his ear, listened some more, spoke briefly, covered the mouthpiece again. "Marks on her neck," he said. "Hard to tell if she was strangled, not until there's a full autopsy, but it looks like a strong possibility."

"Teeth," she said suddenly.

"Teeth?"

She frowned, upset with herself. "That's all I can get when I try to see *him*."

"The man who—"

"Took her there, strangled her, killed her. I can't say if he was tall or short, fat or thin, old or young."

"Just that he had teeth."

"I guess that must have been what she noticed. Melissa. She must have been frightened of him because of the teeth."

"Did he bite her? Because if he did—"

"No," she said sharply. "Or, I don't know, perhaps he did, but it was the appearance of the teeth that frightened her. He had bad teeth."

"Bad teeth?"

"Crooked, discolored, broken. They must have made a considerable impression on her."

"Jesus," he said, and into the mouthpiece he said, "You still there? What was the name of that son of a bitch, did some handyman work for the kid's mother? Henrich, Heinrich, something like that? Looked like a dentist's worst nightmare? Yeah, well, pick him up again."

He hung up the phone. "We questioned him," he said, "and we let him go. Big gangly overgrown kid, God made him as ugly as he could and then hit him in the mouth with a shovel. This time I think I'll talk to him myself. Ms. Belgrave? You all right?"

"Just exhausted, all of a sudden," she said. "I haven't been sleeping well these past few nights. And what we just did, it takes a lot out of you."

"I can imagine."

"But I'll be all right," she assured him. And, getting to her feet, she realized she wouldn't be needing any more aspirin. The headache was gone.

The handyman, whose name turned out to be Walter Hendrick, broke down under questioning and admitted the abduction and murder of Melissa Sporrán. Sylvia saw his picture on television but turned off the set, unable to look at him. His mouth was closed, you couldn't see his teeth, but even so she couldn't bear the sight of him.

The phone rang, and it was a client she hadn't seen in months,

calling to book a session. She made a note in her appointment calendar and went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. She was finishing the tea and trying to decide if she wanted another when the phone rang again.

It was a new client, a Mrs. Huggins, eager to schedule a reading as soon as possible. Sylvia asked the usual questions and made sure she got the woman's date of birth right. Astrology wasn't her main focus, but it never hurt to have that data in hand before a client's first visit. It made it easier, often, to get a grasp on the personality.

"And who told you about me?" she asked, almost as an afterthought. Business always came through referrals, a satisfied client told a friend or relative or coworker, and she liked to know who was saying good things about her.

"Now who was it?" the woman wondered. "I've been meaning to call for such a long time, and I can't think who it was that originally told me about you."

She let it go at that. But, hanging up, she realized the woman had just lied to her. That ~~was~~ was not exactly unheard-of, although it was annoying when they lied about their date of birth, shaving a few years off their age and unwittingly providing her with an erroneous astrological profile in the process. But this woman had found something wholly unique to lie about, and she wondered why.

Within the hour the phone rang again, another old client of whom she'd lost track. "I'll bet you're booked solid," the woman said. "I just hope you can fit me in."

"Are you being ironic?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Because you know it's a rare day when I see more than two people, and there are days when I don't see anyone at all."

"I don't know how many people you see," the woman said. "I do know that it's always been easy to get an appointment with you at short notice, but I imagine that's all changed now, hasn't it?"

"Why would it . . ."

"Now that you're famous."

Famous.

Of course she wasn't, not really. Someone did call her from Florida, wanting an interview for a national tabloid, and there was a certain amount of attention in the local press, and on area radio stations. But she was a quiet, retiring woman, hardly strik-

ing in appearance and decidedly undramatic in her responses. Her personal history was not interesting in and of itself, nor was she inclined to go into it. Her lifestyle was hardly colorful.

Had it been otherwise, she might have caught a wave of publicity and been nationally famous for her statutory fifteen minutes, reading Joey Buttafuoco's palm on *Hard Copy*, sharing herbal weight-loss secrets with Oprah.

Instead she had her picture in the local paper, seated in her garden. (She wouldn't allow them to photograph her in her studio, among the candles and crystals.) And that was enough to get her plenty of attention, not all of which she welcomed. No one actually crept across her lawn to stare in her window, but cars did slow or even stop in front of her house, and one man got out of his car and took pictures.

She got more attention than usual when she left the house, too. People who knew her congratulated her, hoping to hear a little more about the case and the manner in which she'd solved it. Strangers recognized her—on the street, in the supermarket. While their interest was not intrusive, she was uncomfortably aware of it.

But the biggest change, really, was in the number of people who suddenly found themselves in need of her services. She was bothered at first by the thought that they were coming to her for the wrong reason, and she wondered if she should refuse to accommodate such curiosity seekers. She meditated on the question, and the answer that came to her was that she was unequipped to judge the motivation of those who sought her out. How could she tell the real reason that brought some troubled soul to her door? And how could she determine, irrespective of motivation, what help she might be able to provide?

She decided that she ought to see everyone. If she found herself personally uncomfortable with a client's energy, then she wouldn't see that person anymore. That had been her policy all along. But she wouldn't prejudge any of them, wouldn't screen them in advance.

"But it's impossible to fit everyone in," she told Claire Warburton. "I'm just lucky I got a last-minute cancellation or I wouldn't have been able to schedule you until the end of next week."

"How does it feel to be an overnight success after all these years?"

"Is that what I am? A success? Sometimes I think I liked it bet-

ter when I was a failure. No, I don't mean that, but no more do I like being booked as heavily as I am, I'll tell you that. The work is exhausting. I'm seeing four people a day, and yesterday I saw five, which I'll never do again. It drains you."

"I can imagine."

"But the gentleman was so persistent, and I thought, well, I do have the time. But by the time the day was over . . ."

"You were exhausted."

"I certainly was. And I hate to book appointments weeks in advance, or to refuse to book them at all. It bothers me to turn anyone away, because how do I know that I'm not turning away someone in genuine need? For years I had less business than I would have preferred, and now I have too much, and I swear I don't know what to do about it." She frowned. "And when I meditate on it, I don't get anywhere at all."

"For heaven's sake," Claire said. "You don't need to look in a crystal for this one. Just look at a balance sheet."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Sylvia," Claire said, "raise your damn rates."

"My rates?"

"For years you've been seeing a handful of people a week and charging them twenty-five dollars each, and wondering why you're poor as a church mouse. Raise your rates and you'll increase your income to a decent level—and you'll keep yourself from being overbooked. The people who really need you will pay the higher price, and the curiosity seekers will think twice."

"But the people who've been coming to me for years—"

"You can grandfather them in," Claire said. "Confine the rate increase to new customers. But I wouldn't."

"You wouldn't?"

"No, and I'm costing my own self money by saying this, but I'll say it anyhow: People appreciate less what costs them less. That woman in California, drives the red Tosteroni? You think she'd treasure that car if somebody sold it to her for five thousand dollars? You think *People* magazine would print a picture of her standing next to it? Raise your rates and everybody'll think more of you and pay more attention to the advice you give 'em."

"Well," she said, slowly, "I suppose I could go from twenty-five to thirty-five dollars . . ."

"Fifty," Claire said firmly. "Not a penny less."



In the end, she had to raise her fee three times. Doubling it initially had the paradoxical effect of increasing the volume of calls. A second increase, to seventy-five dollars, was a step in the right direction, slowing the flood of calls; she waited a few months, then took a deep breath and told a caller her price was one hundred dollars a session.

And there it stayed. She booked three appointments a day, five days a week, and pocketed fifteen hundred dollars a week for her efforts. She lost some old clients, including a few who had been coming to her out of habit, the way they went to get their hair done. But it seemed to her that the ones who stayed actually listened more intently to what she saw in the cards or crystal, or channeled while she lay in trance.

"Told you," Claire said. "You get what you pay for."

One afternoon there was a call from Detective Jeffcote. There was a case, she might have heard or read about it, and could she possibly help him with it? She had appointments scheduled, she said, but she could come to the police station as soon as her last client was finished, and—

"No, I'll come to you," he said. "Just tell me when's a good time."

He turned up on the dot. His hair was very short, she noticed, and he seemed more confident and self-possessed than when she'd seen him before. In the living room, he accepted a cup of tea and told her about the girl who'd gone missing, an eleventh-grader named Peggy Mae Turlock. "There hasn't been much publicity," he said, "because kids her age just go off sometimes, but she's an A student and sings in the church choir, and her parents are worried. And I just thought, well . . ."

She reminded him that she'd had three nights of nightmares and headaches when Melissa Sporrán disappeared.

"As if the information was trying to get through," he said. "And you haven't had anything like that this time? Because I brought her sunglasses case, and a baseball jacket they tell me she wore all the time."

"We can try," she said.

She took him into her studio, lit two of the new scented candles, seated him on the chaise, and took the chair for herself. She draped Peggy Mae's jacket over her lap and held the green vinyl eyeglass case in both hands. She closed her eyes, breathed slowly and deeply.

After a while she said, "Pieces."

"Pieces?"

"I'm getting these horrible images," she said, "of dismemberment, but I don't know that it has anything to do with the girl. I don't know where it's coming from."

"You picking up any sense of where she might be, or of who might have put her there?"

She slowed her breathing, let herself go deep, deep.

"Down down down," she said.

"How's that, Ms. Belgrave?"

"Something in a well," she said. "An old rusty chain going down into a well, and something down there."

A search of wells all over the country divulged no end of curious debris, including a skeleton that turned out to be that of a large dog. No human remains were found, however, and the search was halted when Peggy Mae came home from Indianapolis. She'd gone there for an abortion, expecting to be back in a day or so, but there had been medical complications. She'd been in the hospital there for a week, never stopping to think that her parents were afraid for her life, or that the police were probing abandoned wells for her dismembered corpse.

Sylvia got a call when the girl turned up. "The important thing is, she's all right," he said, "although I wouldn't be surprised if right about now she wishes she were dead. Point is, you didn't let us down. You were trying to home in on something that wasn't there in the first place, since she was alive and well all along."

"I'm glad she's alive," she said, "but disappointed in myself. All of that business about wells."

"Maybe you were picking up something from fifty years ago," he said. "Who knows how many wells there are, boarded up and forgotten years ago? And who knows what secrets one or two of them might hold?"

"Perhaps you're right."

Perhaps he was. But all the same, the few days when the police were looking in old wells was a professional high-water mark for her. After the search was called off, after Peggy Mae came home in disgrace, it wasn't quite so hard to get an appointment with Sylvia Belgrave.

Three nights of nightmares and fitful sleep, three days of

headaches. And, awake or asleep, a constant parade of hideous images.

It was hard to keep herself from running straight to the police. But she forced herself to wait, to let time take its time. And then on the morning after the third unbearable night she showered away the stale night sweat and put on a skirt and a blouse and a flowered hat. She sat in the garden with a cup of hot water and lemon juice, then rinsed it in the kitchen sink and went to her car.

The car was a Taurus, larger and sleeker and, certainly, newer than her old Tempo, but it did no more and no less than the Tempo had done. It conveyed her from one place to another. This morning it brought her to the police station, and her feet brought her the rest of the way—into the building, and through the corridors to Detective Norman Jeffcote's office.

"Ms. Belgrave," he said. "Have a seat, won't you?"

His hair was longer than it had been when he'd come to her house. He hadn't regrown it entirely, hadn't once again taken to combing it over the bald spot, but neither was it as flatteringly short as she'd advised him to keep it.

And there was something unsettling about his energy. Maybe it had been a mistake to come.

She sat down and winced, and he asked her if she was all right. "My head," she said, and pressed her fingertips to her temples.

"You've got a headache?"

"Endless headaches. And bad dreams, and all the rest of it."

"I see."

"I didn't want to come," she said. "I told myself not to intrude, not to be a nuisance. But it's just like the first time, when that girl disappeared."

"Melissa Sporrán."

"And now there's a little boy gone missing," she said.

"Eric Ackerman."

"Yes, and his address is no more than half a mile from my house. Maybe that's why all these impressions have been so intense."

"Do you know where he is now, Ms. Belgrave?"

"I don't," she said, "but I do feel connected to him, and I have the strong sense that I might be able to help."

He nodded. "And your hunches usually pay off."

"Not always," she said. "That was confusing the year before last, sending you to look in wells."

"Well, nobody's perfect."

"Surely not."

He leaned forward, clasped his hands. "The Ackerman boy, Ms. Belgrave. You think he's all right?"

"Oh, I wish I could say yes."

"But you can't."

"The nightmares," she said, "and the headaches. If he were all right, the way the Turlock girl was all right—"

"There'd be no dreams."

"That's my fear, yes."

"So you think the boy is . . ."

"Dead," she said.

He looked at her for a long moment before he nodded. "I suppose you'd like some article connected with the boy," he said. "A piece of clothing, say."

"If you had something."

"How's this?" he said, and opened a drawer and brought out a teddy bear, its plush fur badly worn, the stitches showing where it had been ripped and mended. Her heart broke at the sight of it and she put her hand to her chest.

"We ought to have a record of this," he said, propping a tape recorder on the desktop, pressing a button to start it recording. "So that I don't miss any of the impressions you pick up. Because you can probably imagine how frantic the boy's parents are."

"Yes, of course."

"So do you want to state your name for the record?"

"My name?"

"Yes, for the record."

"My name is Sylvia Belgrave."

"And you're a psychic counselor?"

"Yes."

"And you're here voluntarily."

"Yes, of course."

"Why don't you take the teddy bear, then. And see what you can pick up from it."

She thought she'd braced herself, but she was unprepared for the flood of images that came when she took the little stuffed bear in her hands. They were more vivid than anything she'd experienced before. Perhaps she should have expected as much; the dreams, and the headaches, too, were worse than they'd been after

Melissa Sporrans death, worse than years ago, when Gordon Sawyer drowned.

"Smothered," she managed to say. "A pillow or something like it over his face. He was struggling to breathe and . . . and he couldn't."

"And he's dead."

"Yes."

"And would you happen to know where, Ms. Belgrave?"

Her hands tightened on the teddy bear. The muscles in her arms and shoulders went rigid, bracing to keep the images at bay.

"A hole in the ground," she said.

"A hole in the ground?"

"A basement!" Her eyes were closed, her heart pounding. "A house, but they haven't finished building it yet. The outer walls are up but that's all."

"A building site."

"Yes."

"And the body's in the basement."

"Under a pile of rags," she said.

"Under a pile of rags. Any sense of where, Ms. Belgrave? There are a lot of houses under construction. It would help if we knew what part of town to search."

She tried to get her bearings, then realized she didn't need them. Her hand, of its own accord, found the direction and pointed.

"North and west," he said. "Let's see, where's there a house under construction, ideally one they stopped work on? Seems to me there's one just off Radbourne Road about a quarter of a mile past Six Mile Road. You think that might be the house, Ms. Belgrave?"

She opened her eyes. He was reaching across to take the teddy bear from her. She had to will her fingers to open to release it.

"We've got some witnesses," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "A teenager mowing a lawn who saw Eric Ackerman getting into a blue Taurus just like the one you've got parked across the street. He even noticed the license plate, but then it's the kind you notice, isn't it? 2ND SITE. Second sight, eh? Perfect for your line of work."

God, her head was throbbing.

"A woman in a passing car saw you carrying the boy to the house. She didn't spot the vanity plate, but she furnished a good description of the car, and of you, Ms. Belgrave. She thought it

was odd, you see. The way you were carrying him, as if he was unconscious, or even dead. Was he dead by then?"

"Yes."

"You killed him first thing? Smothered him?"

"With a pillow," she said. "I wanted to do it right away, before he became afraid. And I didn't want him to suffer."

"Real considerate."

"He struggled," she said, "and then he was still. But I didn't realize just how much he suffered. It was over so quickly, you see, that I told myself he didn't really suffer a great deal at all."

"And?"

"And I was wrong," she said. "I found that out in the dreams. And just now, holding the bear . . ."

He was saying something but she couldn't hear it. She was trembling, and the headache was too much to be borne, and she couldn't follow his words. He brought her a glass of water and she drank it, and that helped a little.

"There were other witnesses, too," he said, "once we found the body and knew about the car and the license plate. People who saw your car going to and from the construction site. The chief wanted to have you picked up right away, but I talked him into waiting. I figured you'd come in and tell us all about it yourself."

"And here I am," she heard herself say.

"And here you are. You want to tell me about it from the beginning?"

She told it all simply and directly, how she'd selected the boy, how she got him to come into the car with her, how she'd killed him and dumped the body in the spot she'd selected in advance. How she'd gone home and washed her hands and waited through three days and nights of headaches and bad dreams.

"Ever kill anybody before, Ms. Belgrave?"

"No," she said. "No, of course not."

"Ever have anything to do with Eric Ackerman or his parents?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

"Don't you know?"

"Tell me anyway."

"Second sight," she said.

"Second . . ."

"Second sight. Vanity plates. Vanity."

"Vanity?"

"All is vanity," she said, and closed her eyes for a moment. "I never made more than a hundred fifty dollars a week," she said, "and nobody knew me or paid me a moment's attention, but that was all right. And then Melissa Sporrán was killed, and I was afraid to come in but I came in anyway. And everything changed."

"You got famous."

"For a little while," she said. "And my phone started ringing, and I raised my rates, and my phone rang even more. And I was able to help people, more people than I'd ever helped before, and they were making use of what I gave them, they were taking it seriously."

"And you bought a new car."

"I bought a new car," she said, "and I bought some other things, and I stopped being famous, and the ones who only came because they were curious stopped coming when they stopped being curious, and old customers came less often because they couldn't afford it, and . . ."

"And business dropped off."

"And I thought, I could help so many more people if, if it happened again."

"If a child died."

"Yes."

"And if you helped."

"Yes. And I waited, you know, for something to happen. And there were crimes, there are always crimes. There were even murders, but there was nothing that gave me the dreams and the headaches."

"So you decided to do it yourself."

"Yes."

"Because you'd be able to help so many more people."

"That's what I told myself," she said. "But I was just fooling myself. I did it because I'm having trouble making the payments on my new car, a car I didn't need in the first place. But I need the car now, and I need the phone ringing, and I need—" She frowned, put her head in her hands. "I need aspirin," she said. "That first time, when I told you about Melissa Sporrán, the headache went away. But I've told you everything about Eric Ackerman, more than I ever planned to tell you, and the headache hasn't gone away. It's worse than ever."

He told her it would pass, but she shook her head. She knew it wouldn't, or the bad dreams, either. Some things you just knew. ●

HOW THINGS ARE

by Barbara Owens

N

ot a day goes by that I don't think of her. Years and years have passed and I am middle-aged now, but on some unexplainable level she and I are still together, she still leading while I follow. I no longer see her face but I know she is smiling, delighted with what the world offers her and so confident in the knowledge that I am here that she need not look back to see. I don't find this odd. It's the pattern of my life. As my mother would say, sometimes that's how things are.

We were cousins, Jamie and I, daughters born to brothers, and closer than any sisters could be. I arrived first, in early spring, joining a family that already included two boys. I was christened Katherine, but my father gently touched my newborn softness and claimed me as his kitten. So Kitten I became until I was old enough to be embarrassed by it, shortening it to Kit, the name I still wear today.

Jamie was delivered a few months later in the full heat of summer, a first birth so damaging to her mother that my aunt was unable to bear more children. Someone once said in my presence that this was a blessing for Jamie's unborn siblings, since her parents could never have given equal room to another child. I believe this to be true: From the beginning, the very beginning, Jamie was the child who made all others suffer by comparison.

This can be seen in even her earliest pictures. Because of our almost identical ages and the closeness of our families, we were usually photographed together. I looked like a baby, a passable one, with plenty of hair and a sweet grin. I was not something that only a mother could love. But a viewer's eye would instantly be drawn to Jamie, even at an age when she could accomplish nothing beyond flexing her fingers and kicking her little legs in the air. There was a magnetism about her, a strength of spirit that leapt far beyond her age. I doubt that anyone could explain it, but no one could resist it. Jamie made people feel good just to be in her presence.

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We grew up two houses apart, our fathers' parents and our grandparents residing between. Our fathers were close, our mothers great friends, so it was only natural that we were constantly together. We looked so much alike that most people simply referred to us as "the McCallister girls." But even my mother, who loved me dearly, would tell stories of the times I was too young to remember, of how people would stop us as we were wheeled side by side in our strollers, and how it would be Jamie they picked up first, Jamie they hugged, Jamie who was told she was a precious little darling.

"Some people are born special," Mother would reflect without a whisper of envy. "Who knows why? Sometimes it's how things are."

I never questioned it. I loved her. We did everything together and we never quarreled. I remember my childhood as sunny and serene. Jamie was always happy and good. Sometimes I was not. Occasionally I needed reprimanding, but it was always done with love and left no dark memories. Besides, Jamie was always there to help me through. She was an only child but she never refused to share, and we traded possessions back and forth until we were nearly grown.

My cousin's interests were boundless and she could do anything. One of my earliest recollections is from the time we were four or five years old. We were sitting on my front porch watching my brothers swing like monkeys in our oak tree. Once they tired of it and moved on, Jamie said, "I can climb that tree."

I glanced dubiously at the lowest branches. Out of reach. "We're too little," I said with my mother's repeated wisdom. "We'd fall and hurt ourselves." I was already involved, however. The instant it was spoken it became a "we" attempt. All Jamie's interests concluded that way.

Her eyes had begun to sparkle. "Huh-uh," she said. "Just watch me."

Together, we placed a small stool under the tree and, by standing on the tips of her toes, Jamie was able to grasp the lowest branch and pull herself onto it. "See?" she smiled down at me. "It's easy."

It wasn't easy for me but I did it, and when we were sitting side by side, swinging our legs into the open air, we had to giggle.

Then Jamie found it necessary to go to the next branch, then the next, and soon she was perched at least ten feet off the ground. I couldn't follow her so far; I clung to my safe low branch and watched in admiration. She was gazing out over my yard as if surveying a personal kingdom.

"I can do anything I want to," she announced with soft satisfaction. And I believed she could.

In kindergarten all the children wanted to be her friend and they were. Jamie was the first to know all her colors, and her drawings were always displayed prominently on the classroom wall. She could jump rope the longest and run the fastest, even faster than the boys, and no one seemed to mind. She was the best at everything, the leader in all activities. She never sought favoritism, it just happened. She was funny, bright, and kind to everyone. Jamie was the first to be invited to any birthday party and I was second. We were the McCallister girls. Charmed, happy as a song.

Her popularity followed her easily into elementary school. She won all contests entered, she was always the student trotted out to impress visitors, and she was becomingly modest at all times. She was a straight-A student, and more than once I reaped the benefit from that. I was an honors student also, but I had a grim struggle with math. Jamie was undaunted by my frailty.

"I'll get you an A," she promised serenely. "Just watch me."

She tutored me and she did it. "I wish things were as easy for me as they are for you," I told her gratefully.

"Ha," she said. "I just try harder for the things I want, that's all."

Yet she never seemed to try. She simply said she would do it and she did. "Just watch me" became the everyday phrase of our lives. If she wanted to win a school election, she did, and the defeated candidates were not resentful. Whatever role she wanted in a school presentation was hers and Jamie never disappointed—she shone. Everyone took pride in her. She was Jamie and she was ours.

Girls switched best friends on a daily basis in junior high, sometimes causing emotions to run hot. But no girl ever disliked Jamie when she turned away to favor another. They were sorry to be replaced, but it was impossible to dislike her.

Through it all, however, was the acceptance that no one meant more to Jamie than I did. We were the McCallister girls and we came as a pair. We were tall, slim, blond, prettier than most, but I was the one who followed steps behind, and that was accepted, too. Both girls and boys might come to me to put in a good word to Jamie, but no one ever went to her to curry favor with me. Everyone, including the two of us, would have been astonished if they had.

I think every boy in high school wanted Jamie to be his. Girls

were resigned to it. The boy they liked more than anything was lost to them if Jamie glanced his way. They could only wait and hope he'd come back to them soon because Jamie wasn't interested in going steady.

"I'm not ready for that," she'd tell each prospect kindly. To me she confided, "I haven't found the one I really want yet."

She was the only girl nominated for Homecoming Queen in her first year. Almost everyone, including her family, was shocked when she asked to have her name withdrawn.

"It's an honor," I told her. "Don't you know that?"

Jamie frowned a pretty frown. "But what if I win?" As if there could be a doubt. "That wouldn't be fair. The queen should be a senior. Don't worry, I'll win when I'm a senior. I'll want it then."

She went to the homecoming dance in lilac, I wore pale green. My date was a lanky boy named Brad Peterson from my general science class. He was somewhat on the quiet side, but he had green eyes and a wonderful grin. We had been eyeing one another in class for several weeks, but that was our first date. It was hard to tell who Jamie's date was that evening. She seemed to dance at least one dance with every boy there.

Once Brad and I were sipping punch when she whirled by, looking radiant. Suddenly he said quietly, "You're prettier than she is, you know."

"Prettier than who?"

He grinned down at me. "Than your cousin Jamie, that's who."

I couldn't help myself. I laughed. "You need your eyes examined, Brad Peterson. How can you say that?"

He shrugged. "Because it's true. You're real." Our eyes followed Jamie spinning by again. "She's not real." Then he held out his arms and we swung onto the crowded floor.

I tried my best to charm Brad Peterson, but after a few casual dates he drifted away. We were always friendly but he never singled me out again, and all through high school I watched him passing with a series of other girls on his arm.

I didn't lack for dates of my own but it was always Brad's green eyes and slow smile that I searched for in the crowd. I never told anyone, not even Jamie, how I felt about him. It was my sorrow and I would keep it to myself.

Before I was midway through high school I had decided to become a teacher. No one inspired me, I just knew that's what I was meant to be. Jamie was uncertain about her future.

"Too many things to choose from," she shrugged with a smile. "I'll try lots of them and pick the one I like best."

My aunt laughed proudly. "Well, whatever she settles on, she'll be the best at it. You know Jamie. She gets what she wants. Once she has her head set there's no stopping her."

Only once in high school did I see Jamie stumble. She wanted to represent our school in a regional competition and everyone, including Jamie, assumed she would automatically be chosen. But she wasn't. Another girl was selected and that day I saw a Jamie I had never seen before.

She was in a daze. She didn't cry, but her face was white and wounded. "I don't understand it," she whispered that night in her bedroom. "I'm better than Tina, everyone knows that. And I worked so hard. I really wanted that. It isn't fair."

I loved Jamie. I thought she was better than Tina too; I thought she was the best. But I tried to be tactful.

"I know, Jamie, I know," I told her. "It stinks. But Tina's good and she tried hard, too. Maybe part of growing up is learning that we can't have everything we want."

Her eyes raked me. "That's just so dumb, Kit. I don't want everything. But if I really work hard to get the things I do want, then I should have them. It makes sense, don't you see?"

I didn't have an answer; I was only sixteen. But I hugged her hard. "It isn't fair," she whispered sadly into my shoulder, and we never spoke of it again. Tina won the competition, and Jamie was the first to congratulate her on her triumphant return to school.

We were both candidates for Homecoming Queen in our senior year. True to her prediction, Jamie won. I'll never forget how beautiful she looked standing on the royal platform in her white lace dress. My escort was the captain of the football team. Jamie's was Brad Peterson.

"We've never even gone out together," she had told me on the day she asked him. "I just noticed him lately. There's something about him, don't you think? Hasn't he got the nicest smile?"

I said he certainly did, and that night, when I saw him standing beside her, looking down into her eyes, I knew Brad Peterson was lost to me forever. That is, if Jamie wanted him, and it soon became apparent that she did.

They went together all through our senior year. That meant that I was always in their company. Always close enough to touch him, and he was always with her. And Jamie fell in love. She was crazy about him.

Brad said something to me once, a fleeting explanation that told me he remembered our night beside the punch bowl. We were on Jamie's front porch watching her wash the little car her parents had given her for graduation. Our eyes didn't meet when he said it.

"She gets under your skin," I heard softly. "It's the damndest thing. Like an itch you can't scratch out."

I didn't answer. I understood. That was Jamie and how things were.

She talked of little else that summer. She adored him, could not stand to be apart from him, he was so smart, so handsome, so loving. I heard it all and tried not to think about it. She and I were scheduled to go away to college together in the fall. I fastened my mind on that.

As the days progressed, however, Jamie's plans began to fade. Brad had a scholarship to another school. The reality of separation was on her mind.

"I don't know, Kit," she would muse. "Maybe I won't go with you after all. I don't think I can stand to be away from him. Maybe I'll switch schools and go with him."

I didn't try to change her mind. Once she got her head set, no one could.

Brad worked that summer as a counselor in a boys' camp up in the mountains outside town. Jamie drove her little car there almost every evening to see him, and she would return more in love than ever. She couldn't remember what her life was like before Brad, she told me.

The family had a big birthday party for her that summer. All our friends were there and Jamie glowed. She was sure Brad was going to give her an engagement ring; she had been hinting how badly she wanted one.

He was late driving down from the camp and I thought he looked tired. He joined the festivities but he didn't smile much, and once the dancing started I looked for them and they weren't there. No one had seen them leave or knew where they had gone. Brad's car was missing. The happy rumor spread that Jamie had gotten her ring and they had slipped away to be alone. My aunt couldn't have been more thrilled.

When I returned home after the party Jamie was waiting for me in my room.

"Don't turn on the lights," she instructed when I opened the door. "I don't want anyone to know I'm here. Come sit with me, please, Kit, I need you."

She was on the floor in the corner, and when I touched her she was shaking. It was going to be the first worst night of my life.

Brad had broken up with her. He was sorry but there was someone else, a girl from our class, Gail Chapman. They had known one another for years and never even dated, but Gail worked with him at the camp that summer and things just happened. He was going to give her a ring.

Nothing I said or did could console Jamie. She simply would not believe it. It was a mistake, it wasn't happening. Brad would come to his senses. He'd call.

She told our family that she would have her ring by Christmas. Brad was saving for something special. Two days went by and she rarely let me leave her side. Brad did not call. Jamie went over and over it—anyone could see they were meant for each other. It was just one of those summer flings. She'd forgive him, she loved him. She scarcely slept.

On the third morning she was smiling again, the light back in her eyes. "Here's what we're going to do," she announced when I arrived.

"What?"

"I called Brad this morning and I'm driving up to the camp tonight to talk to him. There's this secret place we go to at the lake—he rows across from camp and I meet him there. I don't want anyone to know I'm going, so you and I will go to the movies in Sweeton tonight. I'll drop you off, then go up there and straighten this out. No one knows about it yet so there's still time. We'll be back together, you'll see. But you have to keep it a secret, okay?"

She had never pleaded with me before. It flustered me. "But it might not be a secret. Brad may have told someone. Or Gail."

She shook her head impatiently. "Brad hasn't told, he said so. And nobody will believe Gail over me."

That was true. No one ever doubted Jamie. She didn't lie. "How did he sound?" I ventured cautiously. "Does he want to see you?"

The shadow that flitted across her face was erased quickly with a merry little laugh. "Of course he wants to see me, silly. He loves me. He just got mixed up for a while." The fingers that clasped mine were cold. "I'll fix it. Just watch me."

She had decided on Sweeton for our movie night because no one would remember if only one of us attended the movie. They didn't know us there. I was to fill her in on the plot driving back home. I did, watching dutifully, memorizing details, uncomfortable and not completely knowing why.

She was late picking me up. She looked defeated and drawn. "He didn't come," she informed me before I asked. "He must have gotten tied up at the camp."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Jamie said, "So am I," and her voice broke. Then she took a deep breath. "Okay, tell me what the movie was about."

One of my brothers gave me the news when I came downstairs the next morning. Brad Peterson's body had been pulled from the lake just after dawn. They had missed him at camp, found the rowboat floating near the opposite shore, and sent divers down to look for him. There were several empty beer cans in the boat. The police thought he had been drinking and somehow fallen overboard. My brother said I should go to Jamie at once.

She was in her room and my aunt said she didn't want to talk to anyone but me. My aunt was crying.

Jamie wasn't. She just looked sad. I hugged her. "Oh, Jamie, that's why he didn't come. What can I do? Please tell me what I can do for you."

"There's nothing anyone can do." Her voice was flat and lifeless. "I'll never love anyone else, you know." She sighed. "I just hope they don't think I did it."

"How could anyone think that?" I asked, shocked. "It was an accident. He'd been drinking."

"I know." She leaned close. "Just remember you and I were at the movies. No one has to know I was there."

My aunt's house filled quickly and remained that way all day. Everyone came to console Jamie. She bore up well, often comforting the comforters, and although many tears were shed that day, none were hers. I had never admired her bravery more. She made me proud to be related to her.

Again, at the funeral all eyes were on Jamie. She looked beautiful, so pale and strong. It wasn't until we stood at graveside that I felt her begin to tremble. She clutched my arm and whispered, "What's she doing here?"

I looked across Brad's open grave and saw Gail Chapman's bowed head. She was crying, dabbing her eyes with tissue. Reality suddenly blinked for me. In the midst of all the mourning I had mislaid the truth. Gail was the one who had lost him, not Jamie.

I squeezed the hand on my arm. "She has a right to be here," I whispered back. "It's all right."

She sagged against me for just a moment before straightening. Glancing across at her, I saw two tears trace a path down her

face. "It's not all right," she said, and I had never heard her sound so lost and alone. "It isn't fair."

That night in my bedroom, I cried. For Jamie, who had finally lost something she really wanted. For Gail, who had won Brad and not been allowed to keep him. And finally for me, who had no claim on him at all and would never see the green eyes and smile again. It was the second worst night of my life.

The rumors began to circulate immediately. Gail Chapman said that she and Brad Peterson were about to be engaged. They had kept it a secret at first because neither wanted to hurt Jamie unless they were certain their feelings were real. But Brad had told Jamie on her birthday. Then he died before he and Gail could announce their engagement.

My family was outraged by the talk. "What's the matter with that girl?" my mother wanted to know.

"It's all over town," my aunt related, bewildered. "It isn't true, is it, Jamie?"

My eyes fastened on my cousin's face. She shook her head. "I don't know why Gail's saying such things," she said sadly. "Of course it isn't true."

My aunt's face flushed with anger. "She says he was going to give her a ring!"

Jamie smiled gently around our little circle. "There was going to be a ring, but it would have been mine. At Christmas." Her gaze crossed mine without lingering. "But I'd rather not talk about it. It only makes me feel bad."

When we were alone I couldn't let it lie. "Why did you say that, Jamie? You told me yourself that Brad said he was going to give her a ring."

"Just because he said it doesn't mean he would have done it," she answered patiently. "Don't you understand anything? It would have been all right. Brad loved me."

We didn't go away to college in the fall. Jamie was heartbroken and it was agreed that she needed to have me near. I went to work in my father's insurance office while she remained at home to recover from her loss.

The rumors persisted and grew. People at the boys' camp supported Gail's assertions. Although she and Brad had tried to hide it, anyone could see them falling in love.

I knew Gail Chapman and I liked her. I could understand how Brad could be drawn to her. I wanted to talk to Jamie about it, but Jamie avoided even the mention of Gail's name. And Gail suf-

ferred in silence, apparently feeling no need to prove herself to anyone. I couldn't talk to anyone else about it; Jamie had bound me to secrecy.

She was not recovering quickly. She stayed at home, secluded in her room. She lost weight. Her smiles became rare and frequently I saw shadows in her eyes, and she developed a brooding quality completely foreign to her nature. She wanted me with her constantly, but never wanted to talk about anything of importance. I knew something was wrong and I didn't know what to do.

"Just be with her, Kit," my mother advised me. "You're the best medicine Jamie could have."

My aunt and uncle went out of town to a wedding in November. Jamie elected to stay at home for the weekend. I stayed with her, but hours passed in silence between us. She wouldn't go out, wouldn't eat; she stayed in her room and gazed out the window, eyes narrowed as if in thought. Finally, in desperation, I went out to pick up a pizza; I had never known Jamie to refuse pizza. When I returned, her little car was gone. She had left a note for me: "I have to be alone so I can think."

I knew immediately where she had gone. Once we were old enough to drive, we had discovered a lookout in the mountains that became our thinking place. We spent many hours there working out what seemed to be the important decisions of our lives. It was in a remote area on a narrow winding road, and suddenly I was afraid for her. She had been grieving so hard. She mustn't do anything foolish.

A light rain began and the temperature was falling as I started after her. I remember feeling a curious sensation in my chest but I paid no attention at the time. The twisting road and failing light commanded my attention. Sometimes monumental decisions and revelations must come that way, without conscious recognition.

She was parked on the lookout facing a tumbling valley below. She didn't look up as I pulled alongside and hurried through the rain to slide in with her, but as I settled she turned a smile on me, the old Jamie smile, full and warm. She didn't look distraught, she looked peaceful.

"I didn't want you to come but I'm glad you did," she said, squeezing my hand. "I had this problem I needed to think through."

The rain was coming down harder, filling the valley beyond the windshield with dim shadows.

"I thought I could work it out here and I have," she said.

"Good. I'm glad."

Somehow the rain, the closed car, our isolation, gave me courage.

I said, "Jamie, you know I love you. I want the best for you because you are the best and you deserve it. Do you think you're a failure because you lost Brad? You're not. I'll bet you can't name anyone we know who hasn't lost a boyfriend or girlfriend at least once. I know it hurts and I know how much you loved him. But you haven't failed, Jamie. I believe it just means someone better is waiting for you."

She let me get it out before she laughed, Jamie's tinkling little laugh.

"You believe," she repeated, amused. "You act like you know how I feel. Kit, nobody knows how I really feel about anything, not even you. Nobody ever has because I won't let them. I listen to myself, just me. And I know what I believe and I know that I'm right."

I was confused. "Right about what?"

"I came up here to decide what to do and I've decided." There was an edge in her voice, as if I were too slow to understand even the simplest thing. When I didn't respond, she turned to me. "You know. About Gail."

"Gail?"

"Of course. This is all her fault. If it hadn't been for her Brad would have loved me forever, like he said he would. She's to blame for what happened, not me."

Something spun slowly from a hidden place inside my head. It had been there for some time but I had refused to let it out.

"I don't understand. They fell in love, Jamie. You can't stop that from happening, no matter how badly you want to."

Another laugh, a little shrug. "Well, I guess you're wrong about that, aren't you?"

I knew. I knew. Still I could barely force the words out. "He did come that night at the lake, didn't he? Jamie? Did you kill him?"

She sighed. "He wouldn't listen, Kit. He simply wouldn't listen to reason."

I could see his eyes, his smile. "Oh, Jamie, how—"

"I didn't mean for it to happen. I just asked him to take me for a boat ride. I knew I could explain things, make him see that he was wrong. I took some beer and he drank almost all of it; I swear I never saw Brad drink so much. He felt awful, he said. He didn't want to hurt me, he still wanted to be friends." Her voice caught.

"But after a while he got mad and yelled. I just wanted to explain, but he stood up in the boat and yelled at me. I guess he lost his balance. He fell out. You know he's a good swimmer, but he'd had all that beer and the water was very cold." She sighed again. "He almost got back in the boat once so I had to hit him with an oar. Then I rowed to shore and pushed the boat back into the water." Her eyes appealed to me for understanding. "Kit, he just wouldn't listen."

She had come back for me at the theater, discussed the movie on the way home, and all the while his body was sinking in the lake. I wanted to get out of the car and run.

"And now you have to do something about Gail? Is that the problem you had to think through? Because you're afraid people will start to believe her instead of you. Will you kill her too, Jamie?"

She looked relieved that I finally understood. "She started it. It's her fault."

"You can't do that."

She smiled faintly. "Just watch me."

"It's wrong, Jamie. My God, can't you see that?"

"I haven't decided how to do it yet," she murmured. "It will have to look like an accident. But I can do it." For a moment it seemed she faltered. "I loved him so much. We were perfect together. Why did he have to be that way?"

My chest hurt from trying to breathe. "You'll never get away with it, Jamie."

She dismissed me. "Of course I will."

And she would. No one would ever suspect Jamie of doing anything wrong. It was the first time in our lives that I defied her. "I won't let you. I'll tell."

She patted my hand. "No, you won't. And even if you did, no one would believe you."

She was so confident, so sure of me. And correct in her assumption that I would not be believed. "Please don't, Jamie. That isn't the way to solve things."

"Why can't you understand that I have to?" she answered gently. "I have to, that's all." Then her smile brightened, her dimples flashed. "Oh, I feel so much better. Let's go home and get something to eat. Suddenly I'm starved."

I stood in the rain and watched her pull back onto the narrow road. I had not one doubt that she would do exactly what she wanted. Maybe something was missing in her, perpetuated by

everyone who knew her. She simply didn't know how to be ordinary, to lose. With Gail gone she could convince herself and others that she had not failed with Brad. She could be Jamie again.

The rain was turning icy. I had to hurry.

I try not to think too much about that third worst night of my life. I knew a shorter back route that joined Jamie's road just before the sharp curve beginning the plunge into the valley, and I reached it minutes before she did. I saw her headlights split the darkness beyond the railing. She was driving too fast, as always. I huddled against the mountain's shoulder and watched her round the curve, saw her register my car parked across both lanes, blocking the way. She couldn't possibly stop in time.

Her brakes screamed, her tires fought for purchase on the slick surface, and the little car spun, skating gracefully through the railing and out into the empty air. It was over in seconds.

I remember wondering if she saw me. I was certain she'd recognize my car. So she'd know.

I drove carefully down the mountain in the rain. I saw no other cars and no one saw me. When my aunt and uncle returned the following morning, I tearfully reported her missing. She'd been upset, I told them. She sneaked away from me. I didn't know where she'd gone or what to do. Her car, with Jamie's body inside, was discovered later that day.

I didn't go away to college, never became a teacher. After Jamie's tragic accident everyone accepted that I could never be the same. We'd been so close, we McCallister girls.

I also never married. Once or twice I was tempted, but I managed to pull back in time. I wanted it too much and I had learned how dangerous that can be.

I still live in the town where I was born, in the heart of my close and loving family. Jamie is remembered by all as the special creature she was, and I do my best to keep those memories alive.

Gail Chapman moved away years ago. Wherever she is, I hope she found happiness.

I'm sorry for what happened, but I don't feel guilty about it. Nothing should have spoiled what Jamie was meant to be. She was confident that I would keep her secrets, and maybe I would have. I know that I loved her and will never stop missing her. But Jamie had her head set again. I killed her because it was the only way to stop her. Sometimes that's how things are. ●



DISPOSING OF MRS. CRONK

by Peter Lovesey

“F

oolproof.”

Gary shook his head. “Too simple.”

“The simple ideas are the best.”

“What if he susses us?”

And now Jason shook his cropped head. He made you believe in his wild ideas, did Jason. Those pale blue eyes of his, still as the stones in a mosaic, watching you. The mouth like a crack in the earth.

“What’s my action, then?” asked Gary, weakening.

“Collect the readies.”

“Five grand?”

“More if we like. We set the fee.”

“Five is enough,” said Gary with the measured calculation of a young man behind with his rent and trying to subsist on unemployment benefit of forty-two pounds a week. “And all I do is collect?”

“And look the part.”

"How?"

"Suit. Tie. Shades."

"What do I say?"

"Not much. You just collect, I said."

"Alone?"

"I can't hold your bleeding hand, Gary. I'm doing all the heavy stuff, aren't I?"

There was a pause for thought.

"All right, Jay. You're on."

"How's it going, Mr. Cronk?"

Jason asked, grasping the crowbar he used to strip the casing from the frames of the wrecks that were brought in.

"Same as usual."

"Mrs. Cronk still giving you grief?"

"Don't ask, Jason."

Jason hauled on the crowbar and exposed the burnt-out interior of a Vauxhall Cavalier. "Not much here worth keeping."

"Pity. Try the engine, son."

With two or three expert stabs at the front of the car, Jason forced up the bonnet. "Battery looks all right. I'll have that out."

His employer prepared to watch the swift dissection of the mangled vehicle. In other parts of the yard, other beefy youths were dismantling derelict pieces of machinery, fridges, cookers, lawn mowers, for scrap metal. It was not a bad living in these grim times. There was money in scrap. Call it waste disposal, recycling, totting, what you like, it paid. Not many overheads. Low wages. These were young lads straight from the dole queue, glad of anything. With the basic tools, a breakdown lorry, a second vehicle to cart the good stuff down to the dealer and fly-tip the rest, you were set up. Cash for trash.

If only his domestic life worked as neatly as his business.

Jason leaned over the bonnet, peering at the way the hoses were fixed. Then he ripped them out with his large hands. He was the pick of the bunch, in spite of his aggressive looks, the nearest thing to a foreman on the site.

"I knew a bloke had grief from his old lady," Jason said, turning to pick up another tool. "Funny business. She couldn't get enough

Hardly a year goes by without a nomination or an award attaching to Peter Lovesey's fiction. In 1996, this new story, first published in Britain, was shortlisted for the U.K.'s most prestigious crime-fiction award, the Gold Dagger. A new Peter Lovesey novel, *Upon a Dark Night* (Mysterious Press), is due in 1998. †

of it. Know what I mean, Mr. Cronk? Big, healthy woman. Soon as he got into his pit, she was on him, regular, and when I say regular I mean three, four, five times a night and coming from all directions. Too many hormones, I reckon. No bloke could have stood it. Knackered, he was. His work suffered. His pecker was in permanent shock. He gave up going out with his mates. Got the shakes. Anyway, he faced facts in the end. It couldn't go on. So he went to the Fixer, paid the fee, and slept soundly ever after."

Mr. Cronk reflected on the matter while Jason lifted out the battery. "What do you mean by the Fixer?"

"I thought you'd know about the Fixer, Mr. Cronk."

"I don't mix in your circles, Jason."

Jason applied himself to the heavy work, his biceps rippling.

"He takes care of problems. This geezer's problem was his old lady, so the Fixer fixed her."

"How?"

"Disposal." Jason ripped out the radiator and slung it onto a heap of rusted metal. Unlike the others, Jason never confused ferrous and nonferrous.

"You mean he . . . ?"

"Yup. It wasn't crude, mind. The Fixer's a pro. No comeback. This bloke is free now. Free to marry again if he wants, but I don't think he will. Once bitten . . ." Jason gave a coarse laugh and picked up the bolt cutter.

"What happened to the woman?"

"Accident, they said. She didn't know nothing about it, that's for sure. Drove her car off the road. The thing was, this road was next to a 200-foot drop. The coroner reckoned she fell asleep at the wheel."

"Accidental death?"

Jason grinned.

Mr. Cronk gaped.

"The insurance paid up, easily covered the Fixer's fee."

He severed a bunch of cables and wrenched them out. There wasn't much left of that engine.

"What sort of fee does he charge?" Mr. Cronk eventually asked.

"Ten grand."

"As much as that?"

"It sounds a lot, but it's like cars. You pay for a decent motor and you get value. Believe me, he's the Roller of his profession. He don't let people down."

Towards the end of the afternoon, Mr. Cronk passed Jason again. The parts worth keeping had been stripped from the car,

sorted, and stacked neatly nearby. He was already sledgehammering another vehicle. He was a lad you could depend on.

"Er, Jason."

"Mr. Cronk?" He rested the sledgehammer on his shoulder.

"You're feeling hot, I expect."

"What do you expect? I ain't picking daffodils."

"How would you like a cool swim? I've watched you working. You deserve it. Come home with me. I've got a thirty-foot pool."

"What, now?"

"Now's the right time."

"I'm covered in muck."

"You can take a shower at my place. We do have soap, you know."

Mr. Cronk's house and garden were so palatial that Jason wished he had put the Fixer's price higher than ten grand. The pool had a glass roof that retracted at the push of a button like the sunroof on a posh car. The bottom of the pool was lined with blue, green, and gold tiles. There was money in recycling, more money than Jason had dreamed was possible.

He took a slow shower, soaping himself thoroughly in the shower gel Mr. Cronk had provided. He watched the grime go down the chromium plug hole. Then he dried himself with the huge, pink, fluffy bath towel and put on the boxer shorts Mr. Cronk had lent him.

"So there you are, clean as a vicar," Mr. Cronk shouted from across the water. "Come and meet my good lady."

Mrs. Cronk.

She was reclining on one of those long, padded swing seats suspended in a large frame. She must have been twenty years younger than Mr. Cronk because she looked terrific in a black two-piece. Blond, bronzed, and superbly groomed, she was the biggest surprise yet. Friendly, too.

"Hi, Jason. Check those tattoos."

She didn't budge from the recliner, so he had to move in, crouch down, and show her his biceps. She smelt expensive.

"Pure art. And on such an expansive canvas. Do you pump iron?"

"No, I break up cars for your old man."

She laughed. "So do I, but it doesn't give me muscle tone like that."

"You don't want it."

Mr. Cronk said, more to himself than the others, "Many a true word." Then he turned to Jason. "Why don't you try the water?"

"Cheers. I will."

He wasted no time. He took a header, needing to get submerged fast, and not just because he was coming out in a sweat again. The water was deliciously cool. He was not a bad swimmer and he showed off a bit with his powerful crawl, doing a racing turn at the deep end. After six lengths he stopped and stood up in the shallow end. The swing chair was no longer occupied.

"She's getting changed," her husband said. "She's got to get to her flamenco class." Mr. Cronk had changed too, into a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals.

"Is she learning flamenco?"

"She teaches it, four nights a week."

Jason swam another four lengths, lazily, on his back, thinking about Mrs. Cronk dancing the flamenco. After a bit, he turned over and swam on his front.

When he got out, there was a fresh towel ready. Mr. Cronk handed it to him. Jason sat on the edge of the pool with the towel draped around his shoulders, dangling his feet in the pool.

Mr. Cronk handed him a can of lager, ice-cold. He said, "You look so cool, I think I'll join you, Jason." He stepped out of his sandals and sat beside Jason. The light on the water shimmered over the coloured tiles, distorting the shapes.

"That chap you mentioned today. The, em, Fixer."

"Yeah?"

"You said he was reliable."

"Hundred percent."

"Ten thousand pounds, the man paid, for his services?"

"Ten grand, yes."

"Tell me, Jason. How does the money work?"

"Come again, Mr. Cronk?"

"Well, is he paid by results? Does he get the money after performing the, em . . . ?"

"I'm with you. No, there's got to be trust on both sides. Standard terms for that kind of job are half on agreement, half on completion. Five grand down, five at the death, so to speak."

After some reflection, Mr. Cronk said, "It seems fair enough."

"Cash, of course. No point in cheques in a business like his."

"Or writing them, if you hire him," said Mr. Cronk, churning the water with his feet, he was so amused by his own remark. "Do you know this fellow personally?"

"I've met him, yeah."

"Any chance I could meet him, just out of interest, so to speak?"

"No chance," said Jason.

"Oh."

"He doesn't meet no one on spec. Too risky."

"How did he ever meet the man you were telling me about?"

"It was set up by a third party. The bloke made it known he wanted to hire the Fixer. There was a meeting on neutral ground, the bloke and the Fixer. Five grand was handed over. Nothing spoken. When the job was done, the other five grand had to be left in a case in a left-luggage box. The key was handed to the third party, who gave it to the Fixer."

"Neat."

"That's the way it's done the world over, Mr. Cronk." Jason stood up. "I'd better get changed and toddle off. I'm sure you've got things to do."

"I'll drive you back. No problem," said Mr. Cronk.

Towards the end of the drive back to the flat Jason shared with Gary, Mr. Cronk said, "I suppose you couldn't act as third party."

"In what way?" Jason tried to sound puzzled.

"As a contact with the Fixer. You said you met him."

"Just the once, a while ago." He paused. "I suppose I could sniff around, see if he's about."

"I'd make it worth your while—later."

"Five hundred?" said Jason.

"All right. When it's all over."

They drove on for a while in silence.

"This'll be all right. Drop me here."

Mr. Cronk stopped the car. "Don't think too badly of me, Jason. I'm a deeply wounded man. Mine is nothing like the case you mentioned. Almost the reverse."

"I don't judge no one, Mr. Cronk."

"You'll let me know?"

"Get a grip, Gary. He's the one wearing brown trousers, right?"

"Right."

"You look great. Wear the shades, and your rings. Walk tall. And don't forget to check the money."

"Where will you be, Jay?"

"Where I said—down the tube with the cases and the tickets. Piccadilly Line to Heathrow, the night flight to Athens, and six weeks bumming around the Greek Islands. Any problem with that?"

"No problem, Jay."

"There's nothing he can do. I lose my job, and you get the golden handshake, eh, Gary?"

"Yes, sure."

"Try and look the part, then."

Mr. Cronk emerged from a taxi and entered the ticket hall of the tube station at precisely 4 P.M. He was carrying a sports bag containing 5,000 pounds in 20-pound notes. As instructed, he waited to the left of the news kiosk. He was trembling uncontrollably.

At 4:03, a tall young man in dark glasses and a black suit and bootlace tie walked right up to Mr. Cronk and said, "Is it all there?"

Mr. Cronk fumbled and almost dropped the bag as he handed it over to the Fixer. The young man unzipped the bag and made a quick assessment of the contents. Mr. Cronk said, "When will you . . . ?"

"You'll get a phone call," the Fixer promised. He zipped the bag up again. Then he turned and walked quickly through the barrier and down the escalator.

Gary was all smiles on the platform. "Dead simple."

"Give us the bag," said Jason. He took it and looked inside. "Sorted."

The Heathrow train came in. They picked up the cases. On the journey, they opened one of the cases and stuffed the bag inside.

"It was a dream," said Gary, his confidence fully restored. "He was dead scared. You know what? If we played it right, we could roll him for the other five grand as well. Have a nice holiday, go back and screw him for the bloody lot. He wouldn't know it was a con till he got back and found his old lady still breathing."

Jason fixed him with those stone eyes and said, "You're a laugh a minute, Gary."

"Am I?"

"She's already dead."

"What?" Gary went white. "No! Jay, you never?"

"Couldn't let my old boss down, could I?" said Jason, enjoying this.

"For Christ's sake, mate, are you crazy?"

"Went for a swim with her this afternoon, didn't I? Pushed her face under the water and kept it there." He glanced at his watch. "He'll be finding her about now. He'll be saying, 'Jesus, that Fixer didn't waste time.' And when we get back to England, he'll pay up like a lamb."

Gary practically gibbered, "It was a scam, Jay, it was only meant to be a scam. We never agreed to violence."

Jason took pity. He'd had his fun, and other people in the train were starting to look at Gary. "I bet you still believe in the bloody tooth fairy and all. I never touched her."

Gary's breathing subsided. "Honest?"

"Honest. How could I? I was humping these cases to the station."

"Bastard."

"Get real, pal. We're on our way."

Their flight was due to take off at 23:10 from Terminal Four. They had plenty of time in hand. After checking in their cases and going through the passport control, they had a leisurely meal and a few drinks and started to get into the holiday mood.

"How long do you reckon it's going to take before old Cronk finds out he's been ripped off?" said Gary.

"Week. Longer," said Jason. "He might smell a rat when I don't come in to work, but he'll think I'm ill, or something."

"And he can't do sweet f.a. about it. It's neat, Jay. Real neat."

"I'll drink to that."

Their flight was called. They walked to the departure lounge and showed their tickets and passports. One of the officials in suits said, "Would you come with me, gentlemen?"

"What for?" said Jason.

"This is your passport?"

"Yes."

"You are Jason Richardson and you, sir, are Gary Morton? You won't be boarding this flight. We're police officers with orders to arrest you."

After a scuffle, the pair were handcuffed and led away to the airport police office. They were cautioned and then questioned about their movements.

"You've got nothing on us," Jason said.

"We opened your luggage," the inspector said. "Almost five grand in twenties?"

"It's a long holiday," said Jason cleverly.

"Don't waste your breath, lad. We heard about you from Mr. Cronk, getting yourself invited to his place and sussing it out for a robbery, knowing how scrap metal merchants have to handle large amounts of cash. That's naughty enough, but beating an innocent woman to death is evil."

Mrs. Cronk dead? Jason went cold.

Suckered. He couldn't believe Mr. Cronk had it in him.

Gary whimpered.

"Take their prints. See if they match up to the prints on the sledgehammer found at the scene. I'm confident they will. Armed robbery, murder, and conspiracy to murder. Yes, it will be a long holiday, gentlemen." ●

EMPEROR OF THE GYPSIES

by Edward D. Hoch

Michael Vlado had stayed close to home during the months following his journey to Moscow, tending his horses in the farming village of Gravita, tucked away in the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps. He knew that Rosanna, at least, was pleased to have her husband at hand as he neared his fiftieth birthday.

"Sometimes you are like a young Gypsy buck, traveling over all of Europe," she'd told him on his return from Russia. "Your people are here, Michael, and you are the king of your tribe. Your duty is with them."

He was surprised to hear these words from Rosanna, a placid woman by nature, but he knew she was right. The informal Gypsy court, or *kris*, one of the major functions over which he presided, had been in recess during his Moscow journey, and the various tasks of a Gypsy king had fallen to Angar Banjara, his young assistant. So now he stayed at home tending to business, seeing little of his old friend Segar in Bucharest.

It was in the spring of the year, after a particularly harsh winter, that Segar drove up the mountain road to visit Michael at Gravita. Michael was always pleased to see the older man, who understood the ways of the Romanian Gypsies and spoke their language fluently. He'd once been a captain in the government militia, the police force in the days of Communist rule. Now he held a vague but important security post in the new government, which

Edward D. Hoch has created more series detectives than any other *EQMM* author. Most of these characters have a following, and we are often asked where the different series can be found in book form. Happily, we can report this month that a new collection of Ben Snow stories will soon be available from Crippen & Landru Publishers: P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA, 23505-9315. ‡

had moved toward privatization of state-owned companies even though many former Communists were still in power.

"It's good to see spring," Michael greeted him. "The sun brings old friends up the mountain to us."

Segar smiled. "I'm sorry to have stayed away so long. And now that I come it's partly a business call."

"More crime among the Rom?"

"We don't know," Segar said with a frown. "Have you heard of a man who calls himself Jano Mandori?"

"I don't think so."

"He's been traveling around the countryside holding meetings and proclaiming himself Emperor of All Gypsies."

Michael Vlado smiled. "Emperor? That outranks the kings."

"Exactly! He requests tribute to be paid by Gypsies everywhere."

"I'll watch for him. The poor people of Gravita cannot afford tribute, though we might have a few sacks of horse manure to spare."

Segar agreed to stay for dinner, and Rosanna greeted him warmly. Jano Mandori was barely mentioned. At that point his name meant nothing to Michael and his wife.

It was two weeks later, when Michael returned after riding one of his mares around the property, that he noticed a tall stranger with black hair down to his shoulders. He was wearing shiny leather boots and a black leather jacket as he stood talking to Rosanna on the porch of their little house. A mud-splattered car was parked in the driveway.

"Michael," she said, gesturing toward the man, "this is Jano Mandori. He was seeking the king of our tribe and I told him it was you."

Remembering Segar's words, Michael was immediately on guard. The man was younger than he'd expected, probably no more than forty, and his features lacked the distinctive Indo-European look of so many Rom. "I am Michael Vlado," he said, shaking the man's hand.

"Michael. An odd name for a Rom."

"I was named for our country's King Michael, in the years just before the Communist takeover."

Mandori glanced around. "Is there a place where we can talk?"

"Inside," Michael replied. Then, knowing he might be courting his visitor's disfavor, he added, "Join us, Rosanna. I keep no secrets from my wife."

Perhaps she noticed the flicker of dissatisfaction in Jano Man-

dori's eyes. "No, no—I have much to do. You two go ahead and talk."

They sat in Michael's den, where he did most of his work concerning the village and corresponded with other Gypsy leaders throughout Europe. Among a people with a high rate of illiteracy, his skill with words had always served him well. "Now what can I help you with?" he asked his visitor.

Mandori passed him a calling card, printed in gold lettering. "It's I who can help you."

"*Emperor of All Gypsies?*" Michael read. "What's this about?"

"Michael—may I call you Michael?—I'm sure you know that our people throughout Europe and Asia are splintered and leaderless today, a hodgepodge of tribal groups without political power in any single nation. Yet there are perhaps forty million of us, counting the vast numbers in India. We could be a powerful political force. That has become my goal and my mission."

"To unite all Roms?" Michael scoffed. "By our very nature we Gypsies are wanderers, free of all laws and boundaries. Here in Romania we are not as nomadic as elsewhere, but we are hardly prepared to enter into the nation's political system."

Jano Mandori talked on, speaking of his plans and dreams for a true Gypsy Nation. "That is why I have taken the title of Emperor, though I realize it may be offensive to many like yourself. I would ask that I be allowed to speak to a full assembly of your village as I have done elsewhere."

They talked for a while longer and Michael finally gave his reluctant agreement. It seemed to him that Mandori was more a politician than a true Rom, but he had no legitimate reason to forbid his speaking. "There is a *kris* tomorrow evening. You can stay with us overnight and address our people at that time. However, I cannot promise you a warm reception and I cannot allow the solicitation of donations."

"I usually—"

"I'm sorry," Michael said, remembering Segar's warning about the man. "It's that or nothing."

"Very well. Thank you for your hospitality. I'll plan on leaving tomorrow evening after I speak."

"The *kris* is at seven. You may speak for thirty minutes before we take up the evening's business."

Rosanna said very little about the stranger in their house that night. It was not the first time a traveling Rom had shared their

table and beds. "He's a handsome man," she confided to Michael after supper. "But he hardly looks like one of us. His bone structure and coloring are wrong."

"Yet he may have Gypsy blood. Who are we to judge?"

"He is the one Captain Segar warned you about." She still used Segar's old militia rank, as did Michael on occasion.

"Yes," Michael confirmed. "But the people will judge him for themselves. Spread the word tomorrow that he is to speak to us before the *kris*."

In the morning their visitor appeared for breakfast already fully dressed. "You have a comfortable bed," he told them. "I thank you for a good night's sleep."

Rosanna set a plate of eggs before him and poured some coffee. "We eat a westernized fare here. No hedgehogs or other exotic repasts, like some Rom communities."

"That suits me fine."

"Can you ride a horse?" Michael asked, eating with his habitual speed.

"I rode a little when I was growing up in Turkey."

"Good! I will choose a gentle one for you and we can ride over the farmland today."

He had forgotten for the moment that Angar Banjara, his assistant, was coming over to discuss the case that would be before him in *kris* that night. When Angar drove up in the small German pickup he used to haul sheep to market, parking behind Mandori's car, Michael went out to meet him. "Who's that?" Angar asked, nodding toward the tall stranger.

"The Emperor of All Gypsies," Michael told him with a slight smirk. "I've told him he can speak to the community before tonight's *kris*."

"There's been talk of him. He was up north last month, trying to organize the Rom into some sort of political party."

"Is the talk against him?"

The young Gypsy shrugged. He wore a colorful shirt and headband that some found too garish, but Michael knew him to be both hard-working and willing to learn. "The man gives a speech and then tries to raise money. Some think he's a Gypsy stealing from other Gypsies. Talk to Kali. Her brother up in Botsva had a bad experience with him."

Kali Choba was an attractive but hot-tempered girl of nineteen whom Angar had been known to spend the night with, on occasion. Rosanna teased him about when they would get married, but

Angar liked to think it was not that serious. She had come with her mother to Gravita the previous year, while her father and brother remained in Botsva. "I'll look for her before the *kris*," Michael promised.

"What about this case the court is considering tonight?" the young man asked.

"It shouldn't take long to settle a simple boundary dispute."

"Is there anything you want me to do?"

"Talk to them, see if they can reach a settlement between themselves. If I have to do it, one of them will be unhappy."

Mandori came out to join them and Michael introduced him to Angar. "A future king?" the visitor asked, shaking his hand.

"Who knows?" Angar replied. "I haven't decided yet if I want to live my life in one place."

He went back to his truck to unload some bags of feed for the horses and Michael led Jano Mandori out to the stable. His visitor was impressed by the horses. "These are beautiful creatures, and obviously well cared for! How many do you have?"

"Seventeen right now. We sold four just last month."

"Are they all work horses or do you race them?"

"We had one years ago that I raced, but I haven't done it lately. I prefer to breed and sell them."

He saddled up his favorite mare and chose a gentle two-year-old for Mandori. The man proved to be a good rider and kept pace with Michael as they rode out across the open meadow. "This is good country," he said. "Ever have any trouble with the authorities?"

"Not lately. Not like other areas. It's been a bad time for the Rom in Germany and elsewhere. Romania can be bad too, in the cities. Up here they usually leave us alone. We don't bother anyone. We're not even nomadic."

"I heard they burnt a Gypsy village near here."

Michael confirmed it. "Four years ago. That was a bad time for everyone."

"And yet you seem reluctant to enter politics."

"I served on various committees a few years back. I even met with the exiled King Michael, an old man now. I traveled halfway across Europe and back. I've done my part. Now I have to look after my own tribe."

"Then you cannot turn your back on my message, Michael. I am the man you were ten years ago."

Michael shook his head, unwilling to accept that. "I never took

on the title of Emperor. I never tried to raise money from the pockets of the poor."

"Poor! I've known Gypsies in Athens who traffic in gold coins, fortunetellers in Venice who fleece wealthy tourists every day, pickpockets in Madrid who work the churches during Sunday mass! They swallow diamonds to carry them undetected across frontiers, sell their own children—"

"Enough!" Michael reined in his horse and turned to Mandori. They were alone in the empty field. "I think it best that you depart from Gravita this afternoon. You are no lover of the Rom. With someone like you leading us, we are doomed before we begin. You would bring down the wrath of the authorities on our heads. The jails would be crowded with our kinfolk."

"None that didn't deserve to be there!" Jano Mandori's face had reddened and his voice raised as he spoke. "Once the bad apples are weeded out, the Gypsy Nation can take its rightful place in the world."

"You're talking about our people, our heritage!" Michael reminded him. How had their innocent ride turned into this angry confrontation?

"I want—" Mandori began, and never finished the sentence. Suddenly his body jerked and a spasm of pain crossed his face. He reached behind him, grabbing at his back, and then toppled sideways from his horse. He landed facedown and Michael saw the dagger plunged into his back. He dropped to the ground beside the man but already it was too late. Jano Mandori was dead.

They were alone in the center of the field with nothing, not even a tree, within fifty yards. And Jano Mandori was dead.

Michael Vlado was familiar enough with violent crimes to know what he should and shouldn't do. He walked part of the way back to the farmhouse, never letting Mandori's body out of his sight for more than a few seconds, and started shouting until he attracted the attention of Angar Banjara, still working near his truck.

"Something's happened to Mandori!" he called out. "I think he's dead. Have Rosanna phone Segar."

Banjara came hurrying out to join Michael, staring off at the body by the horses. "Let me have a look."

"No. No one goes near him until Segar gets here. He's beyond help, and we could have a murder on our hands."

Banjara caught his breath. "You two were arguing. I could hear voices raised."

"Never mind that. Call Segar."

He ran to the house to inform Rosanna, and after she reached Segar on his mobile telephone they came out to join Michael. He allowed them to walk a bit nearer to the body, close enough to see the dagger protruding from the self-proclaimed emperor's back. "No closer," he cautioned. "Not until Segar arrives."

"When I reached him he was in Botsva," she said. "He'll be here in thirty minutes."

"You were alone with him?" Angar asked. "No one was near?"

"No one."

"Still, a skilled knife thrower—"

"Not at that distance," Michael said with a shake of his head. A car had pulled in behind Angar's truck, but it was too soon for Segar. Michael recognized Bello Ghor, one of the landowners in the boundary dispute he was to judge that evening. A young woman was with him and it took Michael a moment to realize that it was Angar's girl, Kali.

"What has happened here?" Ghor asked when he reached him. "Who is that on the ground?"

"A visitor named Jano Mandori. He fashioned himself Emperor of All Gypsies."

The landowner, a thickset, balding man in his fifties, frowned at the body in the field. He seemed to expect some movement or other sign of life. "Is he dead?"

"Yes."

Kali Choba had joined them in time for these last words, her fresh Rom features attractive even to a man of Michael's age. "Mandori is dead? Thank the gods!"

"You knew him?"

"We met just once in Botsva, when I visited my brother. Mandori swindled him out of money, and more. He was the worst sort, stealing from other Gypsies."

"What kind of dagger is that?" Bello Ghor asked, stepping forward toward the body.

Michael held him back. "Segar is on his way. Rosanna reached him in Botsva."

"He was there?" Kali asked. "Was it about the theft of my brother's property?"

"I have no idea."

So they waited, with Rosanna finally coaxing the two horses away from the body. "This is foolishness," Bello said at one point. "Perhaps a spark of life remains in him."

But then at last Segar's familiar government sedan appeared on the road, pulling in to park behind the others. He got out and walked toward them across the field, wearing the rumpled gray suit that had become the unofficial uniform of former Communist bureaucrats in Romania. "What happened here?" he asked Michael.

"Jano Mandori arrived yesterday and asked permission to speak at this evening's *kris*. I gave it, under certain conditions. We went for a ride across the field. There was some disagreement over his motives in trying to organize the Gypsies of Europe into a single community. We didn't fight and no blows were struck. We were alone on our horses. No one else was in sight when suddenly he clutched his back and fell to the ground. I saw at once that he'd been stabbed and I was alone with the body."

Segar studied his friend's face. Then he knelt by the body and felt for a pulse. Shaking his head slightly, he held a small pocket mirror up to the nose and mouth. There was no doubt Jano Mandori was dead. Segar stood up and told Michael, "Of course you know the story you tell me is impossible."

"I realize that all too well."

"We will have the body removed for examination and autopsy. But prepare yourself, Michael. I will have to take you in to Bucharest for questioning, possibly as soon as tomorrow."

"I understand." It was a difficult moment, as he realized Segar might have no choice but to charge him with the killing. He might have only a few hours to discover what really happened to Jano Mandori.

While they waited for the arrival of Segar's crew to remove the body, Michael sought out Kali Choba. She was standing with Rosanna over near the house, deep in conversation. "Kali was telling me about her brother's experience with this Mandori," his wife told him. "The man was nothing more than a criminal."

"I expected as much. Tell me what you know, Kali."

She sighed, and for a moment seemed older than her nineteen years. "The man pretended to be some sort of shaman. He claimed to have risen from the dead."

Michael's eyes darted back to the body in the field, covered now by a horse blanket Angar had thrown over it. "What is your brother's connection with him?"

"He came to Botsva a few weeks back and spoke to the people, as he wanted to do here. He urged a congress of all Gypsies and

proclaimed himself their Emperor. Some people gave him money. My brother Huta was one of them. Then he came back to Huta again and learned he had a hoard of gold rings. Huta refused to give those up, but that very night the box of rings was stolen from his caravan. He swore he'd kill Jano Mandori for that, but the man was already gone."

"How did you learn all this?"

"I drove up to visit Huta while Mandori was still there. I disliked the man immediately and warned my brother against him. But how many brothers ever listen to their baby sisters?"

Michael smiled, then asked, "Did you see Mandori rise from the dead as he claimed?"

"No, but others in the village swore it was true."

Michael had a sudden thought. "Could we drive to Botsva this afternoon? I'd like to hear anything your brother can tell me about these resurrections."

"Do you think he will do it again, here in Gravita?"

"I don't know." Michael's face was grim. "Either he's dead or he's not, and both seem impossible under the circumstances."

He walked over to tell Segar what he had learned. "The man had some sort of resurrection trick he performed to impress the ignorant, probably before he asked them for money."

Segar nodded. "I know about that. I went to Botsva this morning to investigate it. He would stab himself, or be stabbed by someone else, and survive with only a minor wound. As you know, I've been on Jano Mandori's trail for some time."

"Kali's brother, Huta Choba, lives in Botsva."

Again the older man nodded. "I spoke with him this morning, just before Rosanna phoned me about Mandori's death. He could supply no new information."

"I'd like to go there this afternoon, if the authorities have no objection."

Segar smiled, knowing he was the authority to whom Michael referred. "Go! If you can find an answer to this puzzle, I will be grateful. Just remember that I will have to take you in for questioning tomorrow. I cannot delay any longer than that."

"If you've been investigating this man, you must have some ideas about his death."

"It's no trick this time," Segar replied. "He is as dead as he'll ever be. I read a mystery once, by some British author, about a man who was found with his throat cut in a locked room. In truth he had merely been drugged, and the first person to enter the

room and reach the body did the throat-cutting, his body shielding the crime from the others who followed."

"No one came anywhere near the body," Michael assured him, "until your arrival. I saw to that. And it hardly explains the knife in his back."

Segar sighed. "Yes. Let us examine that knife."

They started back toward the body, but Bello Ghor intercepted them. He hadn't come about this dead man, he insisted, but about the hearing before the *kris* on his property dispute. "Will the court still convene?" he wanted to know.

Michael patted him on the shoulder. "If I'm not under lock and key, I will be there."

Ghor screwed up his craggy face. "I know you don't like me, Michael. I know you favor Slanic in this dispute."

"I favor no one and I try to be fair to both sides. I can talk no more about it now."

They left Ghor standing there and walked the rest of the distance to the blanket-covered body. Segar pulled it off and knelt while he carefully removed the dagger with his gloved hand. "Here's a surprise!"

Michael stared at the silver-handled stiletto. Its blade, now covered with blood, had been filed down until all that remained was a slim needle-sharp weapon no more than two inches long, resembling a dart more than a dagger. "Why would the killer do that?" he wondered.

Segar weighed the weapon in his gloved hand. "Perhaps to fire it from some sort of sling or catapult, although it hardly seems the proper shape with this heavy haft."

"It would never travel even half the distance to where we were riding. Look for yourself! See how far away the nearest trees are?"

Segar seemed to agree. Still, as Michael drove off to Botsva with Kali he had a view of his friend in the rearview mirror watching him with an uncertain expression.

The young woman sat very close to him on the ride over the bumpy dirt roads through the foothills. Segar had made the journey from Botsva to Gravita in thirty minutes, but Michael did not have a late-model government sedan. His battered Russian vehicle seemed to chug on every hill and it was closer to forty-five minutes before Botsva came into view. The village itself was a bit larger than Gravita, and Michael knew there were some shops where his wife occasionally sold the little animals she liked to carve.

Kali's brother Huta worked as a clerk in one of these, a small variety store called Romany Nights. Kali said the owner had been thinking of changing the name because of the recent attacks on Gypsies, but here in the hills things had been reasonably peaceful for the past year and the name had remained. The shop itself was a maze of shelves and display racks, a sort of Gypsy department store reduced to the size of a Bucharest tobacco shop. Kali introduced him to Huta, who was a few years older than his sister, a clean-shaven young man wearing an earring in his left lobe as Michael himself often did.

"Hello, Sis," he said as they entered, using a westernized nickname rarely heard among Rom. "How are things in Gravita?"

"Not so good today. This is Michael Vlado, king of the Gravita tribe."

Michael shook hands with him. "I understand Captain Segar was here to see you this morning."

"Segar, yes." He went back to filling a display case with pieces of cheap jewelry as they spoke. "He wanted to know about my experience with Jano Mandori."

"Mandori was killed this morning on my farm in Gravita."

Huta Choba seemed truly surprised by the news. "Did someone finally kill the bastard?"

"Seems like it. Kali tells me he stole money and jewelry from you."

"He did, and others too. They believed all this talk of a Gypsy Empire."

"I understand he practiced some sort of resurrection trickery."

Huta nodded. "I saw him stab himself with a stiletto. He fell to the ground as if he'd been killed, but five minutes later he was on his feet again, proclaiming himself Emperor of All Gypsies. Some of the older people believed him."

"They weren't all older," Kali reminded him. "You gave him money and gold rings."

"I was foolish," her brother admitted. "And he stole the rings without my knowledge. It was only after he'd gone that I discovered the full extent of his trickery."

"When he stabbed himself," Michael asked, "did the wound bleed?"

"Just a little, as he removed the blade. It was thin, and I swear the man seemed to ignore the pain." A customer interrupted them, and while Huta showed her the latest in Gypsy charms Michael browsed among the shelves and cabinets. There he found

items as common as candles and incense side by side with tubes of rodent-removal paste and love balm.

"You seem to carry everything," Michael commented when the customer had gone.

"We try to. I especially recommend these scented candles." He picked one up and then returned it to its shelf. "If you're wondering about Mandori, I have something of special interest that I found after he left." He disappeared into the back room and returned in a moment with a rolled-up poster, starting to turn yellow at the edges.

"What's this?" Michael asked, starting to unroll it. The poster was over two feet wide and three feet long, with a garish color painting of a leaping tiger at the top. The text was in German and he saw at once that it advertised a circus that had performed in Berlin some twelve years earlier. It was without folds, and except for the yellowing of age it seemed undamaged.

"See here?" Huta helped hold the poster down, pointing to three circles near the bottom. Two of them advertised a lady bareback rider and a midget clown. The other bore the banner *Mandori, the Gypsy Pincushion!*

"Could this be the same man?" Michael asked, momentarily bewildered.

The picture showed a young man with long dark hair, bare from the waist up, his torso pierced with needles of various sizes.

"It is the same," Huta Choba said. "He was no emperor, only a circus freak! This explains his stabbings and so-called resurrections."

"Yet you gave him money."

"I only found this poster after he fled the village. It was in a knapsack he left behind."

"Do you still have the knapsack?" Michael asked. "I'd like to see what else it contains."

"I'll get it." Once more he retreated into the back room. This time when he emerged he carried a forest-green knapsack with a stylized German eagle in black. Michael unstrapped it and found a yellow legal pad that barely fit inside, its top page covered with notes on the Gypsy villages of the Transylvanian foothills. The rest of the pad was blank. Digging further, he found a first-aid kit, a couple of pens, and a small tape recorder.

"No money?" Michael asked.

"He had a suitcase too. You must have found it in his car."

He didn't admit that he hadn't even thought to look. Perhaps Segar had taken care of it. "Did he leave suddenly?"

The Gypsy youth shrugged. "Not really. He said he'd be going one day last week and that's when he left."

Kali spoke with her brother for a time about their parents and then, when it seemed there was nothing more to be learned, Michael decided they should leave. "If you find a box of gold rings," Huta said, "they belong to me."

On the way back to Gravita, Michael asked about Kali and Huta's parents. "Do you really want to hear it?" she asked.

"If I'm not prying."

She shrugged, as if it made no difference. "My father had other women. I know that's not unusual among Rom males, but after a while my mother could no longer put up with his cruelties. She moved to Gravita with me last year."

"Is Huta still with your father?"

"No, my father left a few months ago. Huta has been on his own since then. I've urged him to move to Gravita with me but he likes his job at the Gypsy store."

They talked a little more about life there in the hills, and both agreed the nomadic life was not for them. When the pastures of home finally came into view, Michael was glad to see them. He dropped Kali off at the farm where she worked and roomed, then continued on home.

"Captain Segar telephoned," Rosanna told him. "He's coming up this evening for the *kris*."

"Why is that?"

"He told me he'd explain when he saw you. I invited him for an early supper."

Michael spent the rest of the afternoon speaking with Ghor and Slanic, the two parties in the boundary dispute. Angar had said there seemed no way the situation could be resolved before the *kris* that evening, but he wanted to make certain.

By the time he returned home Segar's car was once more parked in the driveway. "What have you learned?" he asked the government man.

"Very little. The autopsy's still under way. They tell me he had a great deal of bodily scarring, though."

"He used to be some sort of human pincushion with the circus, jabbing himself with needles. Then he had this trick you know about, pretending to be dead and then returning to life." Michael remembered something. "Did you find a box of gold rings in his suitcase?"

"I'll check on it. Huta Choba told me they were stolen when I spoke with him." Then he said, "I'd like to sit in on the *kris* this evening."

"What for? They're not usually open to outsiders."

"As an officer of the court, I'm empowered to attend legal proceedings anywhere in Romania," Segar reminded him.

Michael smiled. It was not the first time they'd voiced this disagreement. "The Rom does not recognize your laws," he said.

"Yet you call on me when you need help, just like everyone else." But his face turned serious. "I am here for another reason, my friend."

"About the killing?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe I did it?"

"Of course not! We are conducting tests right now to determine what sort of weapon might have fired that sharpened stiletto over such a distance. But another thought has occurred to me."

"What's that?"

"You were both on horseback while you were arguing. The horses would have been moving, perhaps disturbed by the raised voices."

"Perhaps," Michael conceded.

"So Jano Mandori, Emperor of All Gypsies, may have become an accidental target. The knife may have been aimed at you, propelled from a powerful air rifle of some sort."

Michael snorted. "Who would want to kill me?"

"Maybe Slanic, or Bello Ghor—one of the two men whose dispute you'll be judging tonight."

The *kris*, the traditional Gypsy court presided over by the tribal king or his representative, began promptly at seven o'clock. Segar was seated inconspicuously near the back of the meeting hall, while most of the others crowded the seats arranged like pews in a church. As Michael took his seat behind the table on a slightly raised platform, he knew that Rosanna would not be there. She'd made it clear long ago that although she respected his position as king of the tribe she could not bear to see him pass judgment on others.

First Slanic and then Bello Ghor presented their sides of the case, calling witnesses to back up their arguments in the boundary dispute. From his place at the back of the room Segar seemed to be following the case intently, occasionally making notes. At the

end of ninety minutes Michael decided he had heard enough. Sometimes he took a day or so to weigh the evidence before reaching a verdict, but this time it seemed clear.

"Bello Ghor," he said, "the fence in question was the boundary line between these properties. It has not moved. The fact that the creek shifted about ten feet due to runoff from melting snow in the mountains does not give you the right to more property. I rule in favor of the plaintiff, Mr. Slanic."

The hatred in Ghor's eyes was clearly visible as Michael spoke, and for just an instant he wondered if Segar might be right in thinking he was the intended victim. Then Michael announced that the *kris* was adjourned and walked out of the meeting hall.

Segar caught up to him outside. "You handled that very well. Your verdict was the correct one."

"Thank you. I fear Bello Ghor doesn't share your view."

"Are you coming around to my theory of what happened out there this morning?"

Michael shook his head. "That filed-down stiletto couldn't have been thrown or fired more than a few feet with any accuracy. No one was trying to kill me, and no one was trying to kill Mandori either. He stabbed himself in the back. He was trying his resurrection trick again and for once in his life he miscalculated."

"How could he stab himself without your knowing it?"

"I imagine he was quite skillful after those years in the circus. We know he could withstand pain and wasn't afraid to puncture his own skin. In its filed-down state, the dagger could have been hidden in the palm of his hand. He flung that hand around as if already stabbed, then plunged the needle-sharp stiletto into the fleshy part of his back. He'd done it many times before, judging by your description of the scars, only this time he miscalculated."

"Death by misadventure," Segar announced glumly. "I read that in a book somewhere too."

"The man was a swindler, preying upon his own people. He's better off dead."

"Once the autopsy is complete, I'll close the case."

In the morning Michael asked Angar to take the horses out, then drove back over the road to Botsva. Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon and he hoped the rain would hold off until he returned home.

Kali's brother was behind the counter at Romany Nights, and

today there was an older man working with him. "Hello," he said. "Come back for some of our scented candles?"

"I just wanted to talk," Michael told him. "Can we get a cup of coffee across the street?"

Huta said something to the older man, who dismissed him with a wave of the hand. He was busy checking the cash register tapes and never looked in Michael's direction.

"That's the owner," Huta explained as they crossed the road and entered a little lunch counter at a gas station. "He's good about letting me off but I'm glad he wasn't here yesterday morning when Segar came to see me. That man asked me a lot of questions."

"He hasn't found your rings yet, but he's looking."

Huta dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "Doesn't matter."

"Is that why you killed him, Huta? Because he stole your rings?"

"I didn't kill anyone. As near as I can tell, I was right here with Captain Segar when Mandori was stabbed down in Gravita."

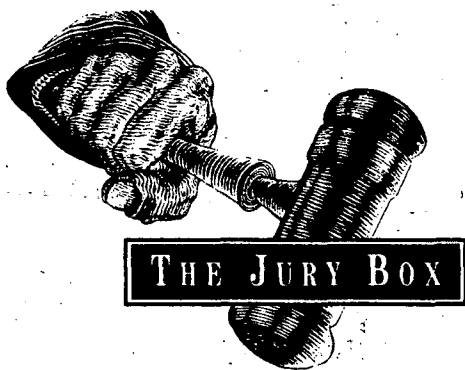
"But I'm wondering why you acted so surprised when I brought you the news of his death yesterday. You knew he'd pretended death in the past. There was nothing surprising about his pulling the same trickery in Gravita."

"I—" For a moment the young Rom seemed confused.

"You told me you didn't realize he was a fraud until you found that circus poster in the knapsack Mandori left. But the poster was never in the knapsack. It was larger than two by three feet, and it was rolled up, but there were no other creases or folds. So it was more than two feet long. Yet the knapsack was barely able to hold a yellow legal pad, less than fifteen inches long. You found that poster while searching Mandori's belongings, following the theft of your rings. When you realized his back wounds were self-administered, using that short needle-sharp dagger, you decided he deserved to die before he swindled and robbed anyone else."

"I was here!" he insisted. "I wasn't even in Gravita when he died!"

Michael spoke in a quiet voice. "Huta, I'm not here to judge you. I'm giving you a chance to flee before Segar gets the full autopsy results and discovers that that two-inch blade couldn't have killed Mandori all by itself. You found the stiletto when you searched his belongings, then smeared its blade with that rodent-removal paste from your store shelf, or some poison that worked even faster. When Mandori fell from the horse, pretending to die, he was only seconds away from the real thing." ●



by Jon L. Breen

It's fashionable to hate lawyers these days, and of all the categories of lawyer, not even the ambulance-chasing, TV-advertising personal injury advocate is as hated as the criminal defense attorney. Anyone who understands and believes in our system of justice should realize what a vital function the defender plays and reject such an attitude, at least toward lawyers who operate within the rules; I've never been comfortable with criticizing people who do their jobs too well. Still, even defense attorneys themselves sometimes wonder about the value of their work, as shown in the first novel by a writer to watch and the latest title by one of the best lawyer-novelists.

**** D.W. Buffa: *The Defense*, Holt, \$20. Oregon lawyer Joseph Antonelli introduces himself with these words: "I never lost a case I should have won, and I

won nearly all the cases I should have lost." As a favor to an old friend, Judge Leopold Rifkin, he takes on the lost-cause defense of an accused child rapist who promptly fails a lie-detector test. In a novel rich in character insights, excellent courtroom scenes, good talk about the law, and unexpected plot turns, Buffa emerges as a worthy colleague of lawyer novelists like Scott Turow, Jay Brandon, Steve Martini, and the three who follow.

**** Lisa Scottoline: *Rough Justice*, HarperCollins, \$23. When her client tauntingly confesses during jury deliberations that he is actually guilty of the murder she has defended him against, lawyer Marta Richter belts around snow-covered Philadelphia looking for evidence to prove him guilty, preferably without violating professional ethics. The publishers are giving the Edgar-winning Scottoline a

bestseller push on this thriller, and to see how much she deserves it, you need only compare the novel to another involving jury tampering, John Grisham's *The Runaway Jury*. Both are fast-moving and cleverly plotted, but pervasive humor and superior characterization make Scottoline's book a clear winner.

*** Joe L. Hensley: *Robak's Witch*, St. Martin's, \$21.95. Midwestern lawyer Don Robak, recovering from a stomach wound received in a courtroom shooting, is about to take up a career as judge, but he takes on one last criminal-defense client: a self-proclaimed witch accused of poisoning her niece and nephew in an eery parallel to "Hansel and Gretel." In a complex and deftly constructed novel, Hensley provides both a detective-story solution and the ambiguity of real life.

*** Robert K. Tanenbaum: *Irresistible Impulse*, Dutton, \$23.95. Call this one a double-modular legal/private eye procedural, concerning several of New York Assistant D.A. Butch Karp's cases, mainly the trial of a white serial killer who puts on black-face to go after elderly African American women, along with several of Marlene Ciampi's get-the-stalker operations, mainly that of an anonymous music lover terrorizing a beautiful cel-

list. I love this series, but setting events in the recent past sometimes causes the author to trip over his time references: a 73-year-old psychiatrist who studied with Freud presented as contemporary with references to playing the "race card" seems too big a chronological stretch.

*** Tess Collins: *The Law of Revenge*, Ivy, \$5.99. A first novelist demonstrates that the legal thriller is not only the province of lawyer-writers. In an example of that rarest of mystery variants, the whydunit, San Francisco lawyer Alma Brashers returns to her Kentucky hometown to defend her brother Vernon on a charge of murdering a local businessman. The Appalachian background is well-conveyed, and the final courtroom stunt is both satisfying and fairly clued.

***** Donald E. Westlake: *The Ax*, Mysterious, \$23. Burke Devore is out of work, a victim of corporate downsizing. Exactly how and why he turns to murder to solve his problems I'll leave it to you to discover. In this extraordinary novel, Westlake captures some of the grimmer aspects of American life in the nineties without a single false note, including an ending that you probably won't predict but that is perfect for the theme of the book. Though not the usual semi-farcical Westlake

comedy, it has an underlying vein of very, very dark humor. Don't miss this one.

**** Steven Saylor: *The House of the Vestals*, St. Martin's, \$22.95. Nine short stories (eight of them from *EQMM* and one from *The Armchair Detective*) prove Roman sleuth Gordianus the Finder as effective at short-story as novel lengths. My historical detection consultant and I especially liked "The Tale of the Treasure House," "King Bee and Honey," and the title story from a collection remarkably even in quality. Readers who appreciate the history of detective fiction (and especially of *EQMM*) will enjoy the dedication. (Gordianus fans should know there's a new story, "The White Fawn," in Mike Ashley's anthology *Classical Whodunnits* [Carroll & Graf, \$9.95].)

*** Richard A. Lupoff: *The Radio Red Killer*, St. Martin's, \$21.95. Lupoff's previous novel provided a solo case for Hobart Lindsey, half of his series sleuthing team; this time the other half, Marvia Plum, goes it alone. The marriage that broke up her romance with Lindsey having failed, Marvia is back with the Berkeley police and looking into the murder of a left-wing radio commentator for KRED-FM. Marvia is more fully realized and sympathetic than ever, and once again the sec-

ondary characters are masterfully drawn, particularly the semi-crazed tape jockey of an old-time radio series. Lupoff knows just how far to go with the historic radio lore—I could have taken a great deal more of it, but that might have lost those less enchanted with the subject. Radio historian Jim Harmon provides an interesting introduction.

** Rex Stout: *Her Forbidden Knight*, Carroll & Graf, \$4.95. One of the circle of Broadway gentlemen surrounding and protecting a beautiful hotel telegrapher proves to be part of a counterfeiting ring in the initial book publication of Stout's very first novel, which appeared as a serial in *All-Story Magazine* in 1913. The writing style of this semi-comic romance is as old-fashioned as the title, making it hard to believe Archie Goodwin's matchless colloquial prose would come from the same writer a mere twenty years later. The novel is entertaining if met halfway, and the evocation of pre-World War I New York is a plus. (The same publishers also offer first book publications of two other Stout serials at the same price: *A Prize for Princes* [1914] and *The Great Legend* [1916]—their detective fiction associations seem even more remote than the present volume's.)



1997 EQMM READERS AWARD

As we close out our 56th year of publication, we once again turn to our esteemed readers for an analysis of the year's performance. When voting in the annual readers award competition is heavy, we know you're enthusiastic about what you've read, and nothing could make us happier.

The authors, of course, are on the edge of their seats. The *EQMM* Readers Award is the only award we know of in crime fiction in which the most famous mystery writers stand on exactly the same footing as previously undiscovered Department of First Stories authors. There are no separate categories in this award for new and established writers: All face your judgment with the same fair chance, the same excitement, and the same joy at coming at the top of your list.

Don't miss this opportunity to tell your editors, and the many fine authors who have contributed to the magazine over the past year, what you found most intriguing, spine-tingling, moving, or just plain good. Make this, the thirteenth year of the competition, a lucky thirteen for everyone by participating to the fullest. Cast your vote!

The rules this year are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner. All stories published in *EQMM* in 1997 are eligible for the award. (See next page for ballot.)

Please refresh your memory of the year's selections by referring to the index on pages 156-158 before marking your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 1997 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1998 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1997 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

**Mail to : The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Dell Magazines
1270 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020**

NIGHT TRAIN TO BABYLON

by Ray Bradbury

James Cruesoe was in the club car of a train plummeting out of Chicago, rocking and swaying as if it were drunk, when the conductor, lurching by, glanced at the bar, gave Cruesoe a wink, and lurched on. Cruesoe listened.

Uproars, shouts, and cries.

That is the sound, he thought, of sheep in panic, glad to be fleeced, or hang gliders, flung off cliffs with no wings.

He blinked.

For there at the bar, drawn to a blind source of joyous consternation, stood a cluster of men glad for highway robbery, pleased to have wallets and wits purloined.

That is to say: gamblers.

Amateur gamblers, Cruesoe thought, and rose to stagger down the aisle to peer over the shoulders of businessmen behaving like high-school juniors in full stampede.

"Hey, watch! The Queen comes! She goes. Presto! Where?"

"There!" came the cry.

"Gosh," cried the dealer. "Lost my shirt! Again! Queen up, Queen gone! Where?"

He'll let them win twice, Cruesoe thought. Then spring the trap.

"There!" cried all.

"Good gravy!" shouted the unseen gambler. "I'm sunk!"

Cruesoe had to look, he yearned to see this agile vaudeville magician.

Although most of his work has been in the science fiction field, Ray Bradbury's name is known to virtually everyone who reads, for he has used science fiction to "say what I think about philosophy and sociology in our immediate future." When he pens a crime story Mr. Bradbury's often in a playful mood. This story will appear in a collection entitled *Driving Blind* (Avon/Fall). †

On tiptoe, he parted a few squirming shoulders, not knowing what to expect.

But there sat a man with no fuzzy caterpillar brows or waxed moustaches. No black hairs sprouted from his ears or nostrils. His skull did not poke through his skin. He wore an ordinary dove-grey suit with a dark grey tie tied with a proper knot. His fingernails were clean but unmanicured. Stunning! An ordinary citizen, with the serene look of a chap about to lose at cribbage.

Ah yes, Cruesoe thought, as the gambler shuffled his cards slowly. That carefulness revealed the imp under the angel's mask. A calliope salesman's ghost lay like a pale epidermis below the man's vest.

"Careful, gents!" He fluttered the cards. "Don't bet too much!"

Challenged, the men shoveled cash into the furnace.

"Whoa! No bets above four bits! Judiciously, sirs!"

The cards leapfrogged as he gazed about, oblivious of his deal.

"Where's my left thumb, my right! Or are there *three thumbs!*?"

They laughed! What a jokester!

"Confused, chums? Baffled? Must I lose *again?*"

"Yes!" all babbled.

"Damn," he said, crippling his hands. "Damn! Where's the Red Queen? Start over!"

"No! The *middle* one! *Flip* it!"

The card was flipped.

"Ohmigod," someone gasped.

"Can't look." The gambler's eyes were shut. "How much did I lose *this* time!?"

"Nothing," someone whispered.

"Nothing?" The gambler, aghast, popped his eyes.

They all stared at a black card.

"Gosh," said the gambler. "I thought you *had* me!"

His fingers spidered to the right, another black card, then to the far left. The Queen!

"Hell," he exhaled, "why's she *there*? Christ, guys, keep your cash!"

"No! No!" A shaking of heads. "You *won*. You couldn't help. It was just—"

"Okay. If you insist! Watch out!"

Cruesoe shut his eyes. This, he thought, is the end. From here on they'll lose and bet and lose again. Their fever's up.

"Sorry, gents. Nice try. *There!*"

Cruesoe felt his hands become fists. He was twelve again, a fake moustache glued to his lip and his school chums at a party and the Three Card Monte laid out. "Watch the Red Queen *vanish!*" And the kids' shouts and laughs as his hands blurred to win their candy but hand it back to show his love.

"One, two, *three!* Where can she be!?"

He felt his mouth whisper the old words, but the voice was the voice of this wizard stealing wallets, counting cash on a late night train.

"Lost again?! God, fellas, quit before your wife shoots you! Okay, Ace of spades, King of clubs, Red Queen. You won't see her again!"

"No! *There!*"

Cruesoe turned, muttering. *Don't listen! Sit! Drink! Forget your twelfth birthday, your friends. Quick!*

He took one step when:

"That's *three* times lost, pals. I *must* fold my tent and . . ."

"No, no, don't leave *now!* We got to win the damn stuff back. Deal!"

And as if struck, Cruesoe spun about and returned to the madness.

"The Queen was *always* there on the left," he said.

Heads turned.

"It was there all the *time*," Cruesoe said, louder.

"And who are you, sir?" The gambler raked in the cards, not glancing up.

"A boy magician."

"Christ, a boy magician!" The gambler riffled the deck.

The men backed off.

Cruesoe exhaled. "I know how to do the Three Card Monte."

"Congratulations."

"I won't cut in, I just wanted these good men—"

There was a muted rumble from the good men.

"—to know *anyone* can win at the Three Card Monte."

Looking away, the gambler gave the cards a toss.

"Okay, wisenheimer, deal! Gents, your bets. Our friend here takes over. Watch his hands."

Cruesoe trembled with cold. The cards lay waiting.

"Okay, son. Grab on!"

"I can't *do* the trick well, I just know *how* it's *done*."

"Ha!" The gambler stared around. "Hear that, chums? Knows how it *works*, but can't *do*. *Right?*"

Cruesoe swallowed. "Right. But—"

"But? Does a cripple show an athlete? A dragfoot pace the sprinter? Gents, you want to change horses out here—" He glanced at the window. Lights flashed by. "—halfway to Cincinnati?"

The gents glared and muttered.

"Deal! Show us how you can steal from the poor."

Cruesoe's hands jerked back from the cards as if burnt.

"You prefer not to cheat these idiots in my presence?" the gambler asked.

Clever beast! Hearing themselves so-named, the idiots roared assent.

"Can't you see what he's *doing*?" Cruesoe said.

"Yeah, yeah, we see," they babbled. "Even steven. Lose some, win some. Why don't you go back where you came from?"

Cruesoe glanced out at a darkness rushing into the past, towns vanishing in night.

"Do you, sir," said the Straight Arrow gambler, "in front of all these men, accuse me of raping their daughters, molesting their wives?"

"No," Cruesoe said, above the uproar. "Just cheating," he whispered, "at cards!"

Bombardments, concussions, eruptions of outrage as the gambler leaned forward.

"Show us, sir, where these cards are inked, marked, or stamped!"

"There *are* no marks, inks, or stamps," Cruesoe said. "It's all prestidigitation."

Jesus! He might as well have cried *prostitution*!

A dozen eyeballs rolled in their sockets.

Cruesoe fussed with the cards.

"Not marked," he said. "But your hands aren't connected to your wrists or elbows and finally all of it's not connected to . . ."

"To *what*, sir?"

"Your heart," Cruesoe said dismally.

The gambler smirked. "This, sir, is not a romantic excursion to Niagara Falls."

"Yah!" came the shout.

A great wall of faces confronted him.

"I," Cruesoe said, "am very tired."

He felt himself turn and stagger off, drunk with the sway of the

train, left, right, left, right. The conductor saw him coming and punched a drift of confetti out of an already punched ticket.

"Sir," Cruesoe said.

The conductor examined the night fleeing by the window.

"Sir," Cruesoe said. "Look *there*."

The conductor reluctantly fastened his gaze on the mob at the bar, shouting as the cardsharp raised their hopes but to dash them again.

"Sounds like a good time," the conductor said.

"No, sir! Those men are being cheated, fleeced, buggywhipped—"

"Wait," said the conductor. "Are they disturbing the peace? Looks more like a birthday party."

Cruesoe shot his gaze down the corridor.

A herd of buffalo humped there, angry at Fates, eager to be shorn.

"Well?" said the conductor.

"I want that man thrown off the train! Don't you see what he's up to? That trick's in every dime-store magic book!"

The conductor leaned in to smell Cruesoe's breath.

"Do you *know* that gambler, sir? Any of his pals your friends?"

"No, I—" Cruesoe gasped and stopped. "My God, I just realized." He stared at the conductor's bland face.

"You," he said, but could not go on.

You are in cohorts, he thought. You share the moola at the end of the line!

"Hold on," said the conductor.

He took out a little black book, licked his fingers, turned pages. "Uh-huh," he said. "Lookit all the biblical/Egyptian names. *Memphis*, Tennessee. *Cairo*, Illinois? Yep! And here's one just ahead. *Babylon*."

"Where you throw that cheat off?"

"No. Someone *else*."

"You wouldn't do that," Cruesoe said.

"No?" said the conductor.

Cruesoe turned and lurched away. "Damn idiot stupid fool," he muttered. "Keep your smartass mouth *shut*!"

"Ready, gentlemen," the insidious cardsharp was shouting. "Annie over. *Flea*-hop! Oh *no*! The bad-news boy is *back*!"

Jeez, hell, damn, was the general response.

"Who do you think you *are*?" Cruesoe blurted.

"Glad you asked." The gambler settled back, leaving the cards to

be stared at by the wolf pack. "Can you guess where I'm going tomorrow?"

"South America," Cruesoe said, "to back a tin-pot dictator."

"Not bad." The sharpster nodded. "Go on."

"Or you are on your way to a small European state where some nut keeps a witch doctor to suck the economy into a Swiss bank."

"The boy's a poet! I have a letter here, from Castro." His gambler's hand touched his heart. "And one from Bothalesa, another from Mandela in South Africa. Which do I choose? Well." The gambler glanced at the rushing storm outside the window. "Choose any pocket, right, left, inside, out." He touched his coat.

"Right," Cruesoe said.

The man shoved his hand in his right coat pocket, pulled out a fresh pack of cards, gave it a toss.

"Open it. That's it. Now riffle and spread. See anything?"

"Well . . ."

"Gimme." He took it. "The next monte will be from the deck you choose."

Cruesoe shook his head. "That's not how the trick works. It's how you *lay down* and *pick up* the cards. Any deck would do."

"Pick!"

Cruesoe picked two tens and a red Queen.

"Okay!" The gambler humped the cards over each other. "Where's the Queen?"

"Middle."

He flipped it over. "Hey, you're good." He smiled.

"You're better. That's the trouble," Cruesoe said.

"Now, see this pile of ten-dollar bills? That's the stake, just put by these gents. You've stopped the game too long. Do you join or be the skeleton at the feast?"

"Skeleton."

"Okay. They're off! There she goes. Queen here, Queen there. Lost! *Where?* You ready to risk all your cash, fellows? Want to pull out? *All of a single mind?*"

Fierce whispers.

"All," someone said.

"No!" Cruesoe said.

A dozen curses lit the air.

"Smartass," said the cardsharp, his voice deadly calm, "do you realize that your static may cause these gentlemen to lose *everything*?"

"No," Cruesoe said. "It's not my static. *Your* hands deal the cards."

Such jeers. Such hoots. "Move! my God, move!"

"Well." With the three cards still under his clean fingers the gambler stared at the rushing storm beyond the window. "You've ruined it. Because of you, their choice is doomed. You and only you have intruded to burst the ambiance, the aura, the bubble that enclosed this game. When I turn the card over my friends may hurl you off the train."

"They wouldn't do that," Cruesoe said.

The card was turned over.

With a roar the train pulled away in a downpour of rain and lightning and thunder. Just before the car door slammed, the gambler thrust a fistful of cards out on the sulfurous air and tossed. They took flight; an aviary of bleeding pigeons, to pelt Cruesoe's chest and face.

The club car rattle-banged by, a dozen volcanic faces with fiery eyes crushed close to the windows, fists hammering the glass.

His suitcase stopped tumbling.

The train was gone.

He waited a long while and then slowly bent and began to pick up fifty-two cards. One by one. One by one.

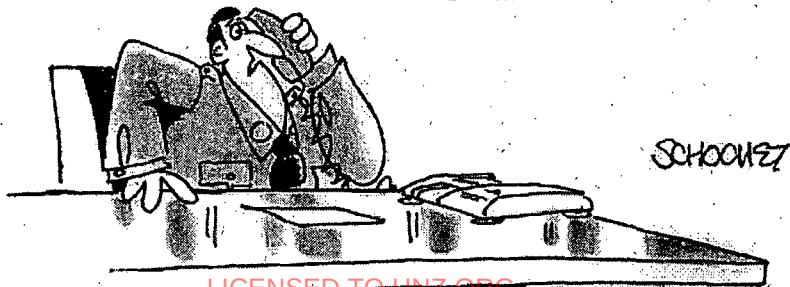
A Queen of hearts. Another Queen. Another Queen of hearts. And one more.

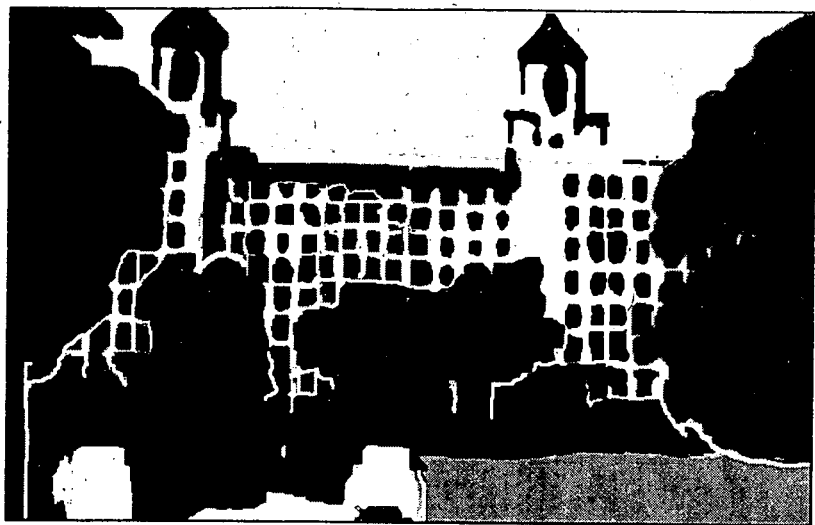
A Queen . . .

Queen.

Lightning struck. If it had hit him, he would never have known. ●

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION





MEYER AND ME

by Gerald Tomlinson

An old man in Steubenville, Ohio, my hometown, used to say there's a story on every street corner. I suppose I'm living proof of that.

My street corner at the moment is 17th Street and Broadway, New York City, where I'm huddled down in a doorway against the bitter March wind.

It's best not to think of the old days, I tell myself, but it's hard not to. Before I gave up my birth name and became known in the movement as Justo, my prospects seemed golden.

Now the future is a black hole. Tomorrow is worth no more to me than a Cuban peso.

But yesterday still glitters. As the muscatel ebbs in its kraft-shrouded bottle and people scurry past me with averted eyes, my strongest recollection is of a resplendent Havana, New Year's Eve, 1958. Through the haze of time and wine, I can still see the swank

old Hotel Nacional, where I worked as a croupier at a roulette table in the casino.

It wasn't just the casino of the Nacional that bound me to Havana. I was twenty-four years old, hot-blooded and adventurous, and the young women of Cuba had bewitched me. My particular favorite, and eventually my only favorite, was Teresa Matos. A native of Guanabacoa, she remains the most exquisite woman I have ever known. Nineteen years old in 1958, a tiny but magnificent jewel, she shines in my mind's eye with a many-faceted radiance.

Her classic face, sparkling black eyes, and air of sweet innocence caused even the most debonair American playboys to take notice.

At first Teresa charged me a fee for our hours together, just as she charged all others, but after a while I convinced her to give up that way of life and move into my apartment on the Avenida de Bolivar. By then she claimed to admire me *mucho*, which may or may not have been true. I adored her. We drank Cuba libres and made love. Our hours together were firestorms from heaven.

And then there was Meyer Lansky, the gambling czar of Florida's Gold Coast and a major player in Havana's wide-open neon night scene. If my personal life seemed excitingly on track, my hard work and comparative honesty on the job seemed about to pay off in a big way.

"Meyer likes you, kid," Jake Lansky told me that New Year's Eve, a couple of hours before midnight. Jake, the no-nonsense pit boss at the casino in the Hotel Nacional, went on to say, "You're the Little Man's favorite croupier."

"Great," I said. "So what?"

"So your future looks pretty good."

"How come? Meyer's not in charge at the Nacional, is he? I thought Moe Dalitz was giving the orders here. The Cubans on

Ellery Queen considered mystery short stories involving real historical characters to be the hardest kind to write. And how much more difficult the task is when the figures and events concerned are so recent that most readers remember them clearly. Gerald Tomlinson tackles the job with a deft hand. When he isn't turning out stories for *EQMM*, he's busy with his own small publishing company. †

the floor call this place the Casino de Ohio."

Jake Lansky gave me one of his fisheye looks. "My brother Meyer's a modest man. He pulls the strings but stays out of sight. Believe me, he runs this rug joint and plenty of others. Not just in Havana—in Florida, Arkansas, Vegas. If you want to think your heavy-hitter from Ohio, Mr. Moe Dalitz, calls the shots, go ahead. Moe's very big in Cleveland. But Meyer Lansky's the boss down here."

I looked at him doubtfully. "If you say so."

"I say so. You worked at the Beverly Hills Club up in Kentucky, right?"

"For three years. Covington."

"And you thought Moe ran it?"

"Yeah."

"You thought wrong. Moe had a say in it, sure. But my brother's the one who gave him his orders. So when the Little Man comes by your table tonight, flash him a big grin. It can't hurt. Meyer intends to make you pit boss at the Sans Souci."

I stared at him in disbelief. "The Sans Souci?"

"That's right. And if you think Señor Trafficante from Dade County runs the Sans Souci, think again. Meyer's in charge. If he wants you as pit boss, you'll be pit boss."

I couldn't believe it, but Jake assured me it was true.

"You know what a mogul is?" he asked, forcing his mouth into the hint of a smile. "My brother's a mogul. And he's in your corner. He wants you to move up."

Meyer came by my roulette table that night, all five feet four and a half inches of him. Stylishly dressed, as always, wearing a silk suit that shouted money, he waved stiffly at me to acknowledge my presence. I flashed him a big grin.

But at that exact moment, the future of Cuba arrived. All hell broke loose in Havana. It roared and crashed like staccato thunder in the city streets. It echoed onto the floor of the casino. Startled faces checked out different possible routes of escape. The most jaded eyes registered fright, the most cynical mouths went agape.

"It's that Castro schmuck from the hills!" Jake yelled, racing toward us from somewhere, bouncing off one after another of the fashionable, distracted patrons on the crowded casino floor. "Get out of here! Fast!"

Meyer wasted no time. He scampered out of the Hotel Nacional like a startled chipmunk. He caught one of the last planes to

Miami, leaving behind a bit of his dignity and millions of dollars in cash. Jake vanished too.

I didn't have millions in cash; I was entwined nightly with Teresa, and I didn't leave right away. Big mistake. The bearded one promptly smashed the slot machines, closed the casinos, and left professionals like me without a paycheck, a payoff, or prospects for mañana.

Teresa grew noticeably cooler in the boudoir as pro-Castro fever grew hotter in the Cuban capital. She mirrored the mood of the city. Anyone who had played ball with Batista, the ex-dictator and close friend of Meyer Lansky, started to feel more and more frozen out.

Prison added to the chill. About a week after the coup, Castro's men collared me and locked me up. They didn't bother to tell me why. They let me commune with the cockroaches.

As I fumed inside the dingy prison, a putrid hellhole under present as well as past dictators, who should I spot in the yard one day but Jake Lansky. I thought he had hightailed it back to Broward. Or Vegas. I ambled over.

"Hey, Jake," I greeted him. "How come you didn't make it out of town?"

"I did make it out, kid. Same flight as Meyer. But the Little Man sent me back here to try to arrange something with Fidel."

Jake acted morose, but I couldn't help chuckling at his plight. "Looks like you struck out."

His eyes bored into mine without amusement. "The deal fell through. Fidel's got a bad temper, like we all knew anyway. But he won't mess with Meyer. I'll be out of here soon. So will you. It pays to be a gringo down here, even if they hate you for it. And who needs Havana anyway now that this fuzz-face is running things?"

"Cuba libre," I muttered.

"Forget Cuba libre, kid. Unless you're talking about rum and Coke and lime juice. It's over. Havana is down the tube. Meyer'll set you up in Vegas. Probably not as a pit boss, which you would've been at the Sans Souci. But you can go back to roulette."

It made sense.

Except that Meyer had other plans for me. No sooner had I landed at Miami International Airport than one of the Little Man's big guys, a muscled minion wearing a jungle T-shirt,

tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Mr. Lansky wants to see you."

Our tête-à-tête took place at a posh Miami Beach hotel, where the senior Lansky was clearly a man of respect despite his real name, Suchowljansky, and his place of national origin, Russia.

"You're a roulette croupier, am I right?" Meyer began, as if the Sans Souci job had never existed.

"I used to be," I said. "At the Hotel Nacional."

Lansky went on, tight-lipped, impassive. "We're going back to Cuba, young man. That mountain goat in his army-navy uniform, he's got to go. I've been talking to the CIA, and they agree. We're putting out a contract on Castro. A hit. You with us?"

I knew the Little Man was a busy man, a man who wasted no words, but so far I didn't know enough to say yes or no. I said, "What?"

He offered me a drink, and when I asked for a Cuba libre, more as a joke than a wish, he patted me on the forearm as if I'd made a statement of principle. "Good for you," he said. "There's money to be made in Cuba. Big money. And the CIA is on our side. Here's the plan."

Two weeks later my new name was Justo Dominguez and my new game was making exploding cigars. Not the kind of yuk-yuk toy they sell in novelty stores, but the kind of lethal device they make in safe houses under deep cover.

Looking plausibly Cuban, or so Meyer thought, and speaking Spanish without an accent, I would be one of the emissaries to enter the lair of the dictator, maybe the only emissary. But first I had to help a trio of government-trained bomb experts fashion a high-quality Havana cigar that Fidel, all unaware, would light up. The consequent explosion was supposed to blow away his face and, with it, the anti-Batista revolution.

We set up shop in a run-down Miami apartment.

My co-workers inspired little confidence. Two of them, Tad and Virgil, spent their days and nights in topless bars. Although both were reputedly pros in the bomb-making game, their real interest lay in blond bombshells. Only Sam, a guy from Coral Gables whose face had more pits than a peach orchard, seemed to be making a serious effort to perfect the exploding perfecto.

Many months into the project, just before Christmas and Chanukah, 1960, I said to Sam, "You know, there's going to be an

invasion of Cuba before we ever get this bomb right. That's what I hear."

He waved dismissively. "This is a crazy idea anyhow. I could bomb Castro's car tomorrow and blow him into chicken parts. But an exploding cigar? I think somebody's been reading too many spy novels."

Since I was an amateur among pros, I still thought the scheme could work. I turned the latest prototype cigar over in my hands. "It looks like the real thing," I said. "It smells expensive."

"It is expensive. There's no better cigar made. But the explosives in it won't wipe out the maximum leader. They'll mess up his face pretty bad—that is, if someone can get close enough to him to plant it. It'll singe his whiskers for sure. But it won't kill him."

In truth, the cigar didn't look very deadly. It looked like a good smoke. But that was the whole point, I thought.

As I spoke, Sam—my only co-worker on the scene, the other two full-time party animals and halfhearted munitions makers having gone out on the town—caressed an earlier model of the cigar bomb. He growled. "I'd like to start working on something practical. I'm a bomb maker, not a comedian. This thing's a joke."

He tossed the stogie at me across the workbench.

Now, the mechanism in that exploding cigar, like the one in my new, improved model, was supposed to be triggered only by heat. It worked something like a smoke alarm, you might say. In theory, you could drop it from the Enola Gay and it wouldn't explode.

That's in theory.

In reality, when it skidded into my upturned right hand on the workbench, it went off like a Roman candle. My hand trapped the explosion.

I screamed, and then I passed out.

When I came to, the surroundings were white and surgical. Hospital workers scurried about. My hand, or what was left of it, looked like a snow-encrusted mummy's claw, all wrapped up for the holidays. The nurse, speaking in the familiar dulcet tones of medical reassurance, pooh-poohed my alarm. But nobody needed to tell me that when that right hand was unwrapped it wouldn't be spinning a roulette wheel.

Or making bombs.

My trio of compañeros, it turned out, had fled the apartment, fled the city, fled the country, leaving me to face, of all things, a

rap for possession of illegal fireworks. As Justo Dominguez, I drew a suspended sentence.

Meyer Lansky didn't come a-calling, then or later. Neither did his stolid brother Jake. I had to assume they were no longer in my corner.

I yearned for the comforting arms of Teresa, but wondered how she would react to my damaged right hand. The last three fingers were gone, the index finger a thimble-length stump. It wasn't pretty. And it wasn't useful.

Clearly, I needed some job retraining. Or else a featherbed position in the Lansky empire. Since Meyer wouldn't come to the maimed, the maimed finally went to Meyer. I caught up with him at his favorite stone-crab restaurant in Miami Beach.

"Roulette, no," I admitted, when Meyer inquired about my specialty. "I can't work the table anymore. But there must be something I can do for the organization."

Meyer shrugged. "This ain't a charity ward, young man. (It definitely wasn't; he was sipping Dom Pérignon.) "You want to do something for the organization, I suggest you get lost."

"Wait a minute," I pleaded. "All I really wanted to do after Havana was work a roulette table in Vegas." I thrust my wounded hand at him accusingly. "You're the one who set me up in that grubby bomb factory."

A tinge of annoyance crept into Meyer's voice. "Not true. That was a CIA operation all the way. You think I'd pay good money to have a bunch of klutzes make an exploding cigar?"

His answer caught me off guard. I didn't know what to think. "The CIA?" I echoed uncertainly.

"Correct. Go talk to them. Visit Langley. Shove your ugly claw in somebody's face up there. Scream at the CIA bureaucrats for turning you into a welfare slob. Just don't bother me no more."

We sparred for a few extra minutes, with me citing my loyalty to all my former bosses and him dubbing me "Lefty." The interview went nowhere. As some truth-teller put it long ago, the mob is not an equal-opportunity employer.

I never considered squawking to the CIA. What did I know about the spy business? As for Langley, I thought it was an air-force base.

By 1965 I'd adjusted to the vocation of two-bit thief.

At least I was self-supporting. My base of operations was the West Village in Manhattan. I paid low rent for a Perry Street

walk-up and had access to plenty of fence-friendly merchandise within easy strolling distance. What better setup for a house-breaker? My left hand served me well. I wasn't getting rich, but I had a few dollars in my pocket and a wall laden with hi-fi equipment.

For several years I thought resentfully, though not very often, about the mob, the CIA, roulette, and Teresa Matos. But life offers no replays. My career had progressed from spinning a roulette wheel in Havana to thieving in Greenwich Village, with a brief, misguided detour down the road to bomb making in Miami. It could have been worse.

I still used the name Justo. Since my real name was Mieczyslaw, I was open to almost any substitute. Besides, I liked playing the role of a fiery Cuban exile in the Greenwich Village coffee-houses. I claimed to have lost those three and a half fingers in a Batista torture chamber. My story, artfully elaborated and improved, went over well with the kids, evoking much concern. No one thought to ask me why, given my politics, I became an exile instead of a happy communist in Castroland.

In fact, my whole fabricated life seemed to have a certain appeal to the flower folk of the day. One of them, a surpassingly cute brunette who looked a little like Teresa, moved in with me. She was, or said she was, Rhonda Selden of the Mamaroneck Seldens. I was, or said I was, Justo Dominguez of the Camagüey Dominguezes.

By now I might be living in a duplex on West 11th Street if Meyer Lansky hadn't unexpectedly shown himself to have a heart bigger than Caesar's Palace.

One day in early 1972 I was walking along Bleecker Street when a lean, middle-aged man with a long face fell into step beside me.

"You're Justo Dominguez?" he asked.

"Yeah," I admitted. "The Cuban hero."

"You've been recommended to me," he said softly. "Does the sobriquet 'Little Man' mean anything to you?"

This stranger sounded educated, more like an Ivy Leaguer than a mobster. "It means Meyer Lansky," I whispered back at him. "He's living in Israel, I think."

The stranger nodded, steered me into a nearby bar, motioned me into a booth, ordered two Cuba libres. Meyer must have had

quite a memory, after all, though my actual preference was scotch. He started to talk.

Within a couple of minutes, I interrupted. "You're CIA?"

He put an index finger cautioningly to his lip. "Let's just say I'm a man with a mission. Like the Marines, I need a few good men. The Little Man says you follow orders and don't blab. Is he right?" "He's always right."

We talked some more, a lot more. He offered money, a lot of money. He made the caper sound like a big deal, a very big deal.

And so it happened that in the early morning hours of June 17, 1972, five other recruits and I stood on Virginia Avenue in the Foggy Bottom section of Washington, D.C., peering up at an enormous building that looked like an interlocking series of stacked disks. Our crew consisted of a locksmith, some electronic wizards, and me. Our target was a suite on the sixth floor—the national headquarters of the Democratic Party.

We donned our surgical gloves and made ready for a brief night's work at The Watergate.

The rest of the story needs no elaboration. Although I escaped arrest, I lived for many years thinking that the long-faced man would get around to fingering me as one of those at the scene of the break-in. He never did. Even so, the Watergate caper took a good deal of the verve and optimism out of my life.

Did it put me on the skids? Yes, I suppose it did. Still, I might have gone back to second-story work in the Village once my money ran out, the furor subsided, and I'd lived down the disappointment of the botched assignment.

Two events drove me over the edge.

First, Rhonda Selden of the Larchmont Seldens married J. Wentworth Abernathy of the Larchmont Abernathys.

I could have coped with that.

But then Teresa Matos, the only cherished and irreplaceable woman in my life, was arrested in Washington, D.C., in 1978, for cavorting, naked as a radish, in the Reflecting Pool with a besotted seventy-four-year-old congressman from Florida.

I sought solace in scotch, but quickly tumbled down the barfly's ladder of booze and now assuage my sorrow with muscatel—except on New Year's Eve, when I still try to put aside enough dimes and quarters for at least one Cuba libre. ●

THE LORD OF THE BOOK

by Michael Gilbert

Robert Bracknell said to Hugo, who was his son and a very junior partner in the firm of Fearn and Bracknell, solicitors, "I wonder if you know a man called Rupert Hay."

"Rupert," said Hugo enthusiastically, "I'll say I know Rupert. The best lock forward we ever had in the Southwark team. Played regularly for Middlesex—"

"But, surely—"

"Shoulders like a blacksmith."

"Surely he's a bit old to be playing Rugby football."

"Well, it's mostly coaching these days. But he still turns out for the 'A' team when they're short. And mighty glad they are to have him. Pushes in the scrum like a bulldozer, but give him the ball and he goes for the line like a wing threequarter."

"Could we confine ourselves, for the moment, to facts? What sort of age is he?"

"Well, he must be all of forty, I suppose. His son's just left school. He plays for us, too. A very promising fly-half—"

"Hasn't he got a daughter as well?"

"I believe he has," said Hugo, with a massive indifference that immediately aroused his father's suspicions.

"What does he do?"

"Oh, his job—something to do with building."

"You mean that when he isn't chasing an egg-shaped ball up and down a muddy field, he's carrying hods of bricks up a ladder."

Fifty years after the publication of his first book, Michael Gilbert is still writing at the very highest level of the crime/mystery genre. Like most of his novels, his latest "Mr. Piggins" story for *EQMM* showcases a complex plot and extremely likable characters. Mr. Gilbert's most recent novel, *Ring of Terror*, was published in the U. K. by Hodder & Stoughton; in the U.S., in 1995, by Carroll & Graf. ¶

"No, no. He's not a labourer. I didn't mean that. He's got his own building firm. Not a large one, but very sound. If you want a repair job done—"

"My interest in Rupert Hay is purely professional. He intends, if I agree, to become a client of this firm."

"Couldn't have a better one."

"We'll see about that. General Crispin certainly gave him a good chit. The only thing was that when Hay spoke to me on the telephone he seemed a little confused about what he did want. All I could gather was that it was something about his daughter. Do I gather that you've never met her?"

"She came to our last rugger club dance."

His father observed a slight but treacherous colour in his son's smooth cheek. He said, "And did you dance with her?"

"When I could get near her. The chaps were round her like flies round a jam pot."

"Then I gather she's attractive."

"You could say that. Yes."

"Have you seen her lately?"

"Now that you mention it, I haven't. No. Someone told me she'd gone abroad, to be finished."

"Not so. I gathered from her father that she's been kidnapped."

Hugo stared at him and then said, "But surely, Dad, the police—"

"The police can do nothing. This is a strictly legal kidnapping. Now, don't ask me a lot of questions that I can't answer. He's coming to see me this afternoon. I'll tell you all about it this evening."

When Rupert Hay arrived at the Fearn and Bracknell office, which is not easy to find, being tucked away behind the Tower of London, he stopped in the outer office to have a word with Mr. Piggins, their managing clerk. They seemed to know each other, but then Mr. Piggins knew almost everybody in the curious area, half City and half East End, that lies between Southwark Cathedral and Aldgate Pump. It occurred to Mr. Bracknell that if he had wanted background information it would have been more sensible to have consulted Mr. Piggins rather than his own son.

His new client came into his office cautiously, as though he were negotiating a minefield. Clearly not a man who had much to do with solicitors. He refused a cigarette, murmuring something about training, and seated himself on the edge of the client chair.

Mr. Bracknell, deciding that the normal preliminaries would be a waste of time, simply said, "Tell me about it."

"Well, it started with window cleaners."

In the pause that followed Mr. Bracknell tried to adjust himself to this unexpected opening.

"They came—there were two of them—my wife and I were away for the day and Antonia was alone in the house. I think they must have watched us drive off. They knocked at the door and told my daughter that we had ordered them, so, of course, she let them in." Feeling that some further explanation was needed, he said, "They weren't a pair of scruffs. They were wearing camouflage jackets and their hair was cut short, but they were quite personable and well spoken. Two of them, they explained. One to clean the insides, the other the outsides. It took them two hours and they made a good job of it. When they had finished Antonia offered them a cup of tea. 'If it's not too much trouble,' they said. Then they got talking. We heard all about this when we got back. It seemed that window cleaning was only a part-time job. They took money for it—quite a large amount, I thought—but it didn't go to them. It was all paid into a fund, run by a man who called himself the Lord of the Book. They were just his—I don't know the right word—"

"Acolytes?"

"Yes. That would be the word. A good deal of religion came into it, that much I did gather."

Mr. Bracknell now had a fair idea of where they were going, but he refrained from interrupting. Experience had taught him that when a client had something he wanted to get off his chest, the sooner he was allowed to do so the better.

"There was this book, you see. It was more than two thousand years old. It had been sealed up in a box and buried in the Gobi Desert. An explorer had found it and brought it back to England. He couldn't read it, because it was in Latin—not straightforward Latin, more a sort of code. This man—the one the explorer showed the book to—his name's Hegler, Paul Hegler. He's a great scholar. He had copies made and worked on them for more than a year. He found that the book was full of wonderful truths which could be given a modern interpretation. Antonia told me one of them. I wrote it down."

He opened the briefcase he had brought with him and after a search produced a rather scruffy piece of paper and read out:

"Benign spiritual health is being constantly showered down on us from the ether. Like electricity, it can be captured and stored in batteries for our use.' She thought that was remarkable. They gave her a book which had a lot of other pieces in it."

"Gave it?"

"Well, no. She had to pay for it. It cost her ten pounds. When I heard this I began to think that the whole thing was a bit of a swindle. About a week later, when we were out, the same men came round again. This time Antonia didn't tell us what they said, or anything about it. One of our neighbours had noticed them and told us. Then, for a month or more, nothing happened. There may have been letters, or telephone calls. She may have gone out to meet the men. We don't spy on our daughter. We just hoped the whole thing, whatever it was, would blow over. Then we found this on the dining-room table."

This time it was a sheet of expensive writing paper that appeared out of his briefcase. On it, in a clear schoolgirl hand, was written: "I have decided to become a Maiden of the Book. There is no need to look for me. I am quite happy."

There was a long pause while Mr. Bracknell looked first at the paper and then at Mr. Hay. He said, "And so—?"

"We didn't know what to do. Antonia is over sixteen and free to live her own life."

"And was that all?"

"No. A short time after that we got another note. Here it is."

This one was in block capitals. It said: "I NEED SOME THINGS. PLEASE SEND £500 OF MY MONEY TO THIS ADDRESS."

"Well, that seemed quite possible. She may have needed any amount of things. When she left she had nothing with her but the clothes she stood up in. She had quite a large balance with a savings account we'd opened for her. Withdrawals had to be signed by her and me. There was a withdrawal form with the paper, which she'd signed. So I added my signature, withdrew the money, and took it round to the address she'd given us. It turned out to be a tobacconist's. I didn't much like the look of the man behind the counter, but he gave me a receipt."

This was added to the other papers on the table.

"And then—" said Mr. Bracknell gently.

"Next time it was two thousand pounds. There was just enough in the account to meet it."

"And you sent it?"

"No. I decided I must get some advice. Your son had often mentioned your name. I was certain you'd be able to tell me what I ought to do."

"First things first," said Mr. Bracknell. "This sort of thing is rather outside our ordinary run of business. I shall have to consult my partners."

"Hugo is one of your partners, isn't he? I'm sure he'd want you to help me."

There was an undercurrent of desperation in his voice.

Mr. Bracknell hardened his heart. He said, "Hugo's only one of my partners. There are three others. If they agree, I'll accept you as a client. But I feel bound to tell you that I can't, at the moment, see how we can help you."

That evening the partnership was in formal session. It was a tightly knit group.

Francis Fearn and Robert Bracknell had been in practice together for more than twenty years. Recently they had been joined by Bracknell's son Hugo—after he had been allowed to waste a couple of years skirmishing round Europe—and Fearn's daughter, Tara, who had taken a Law degree at London University, with First Class honours.

Fearn was in the chair.

He said, "Viewing him as a person, I should have no objection to acting for Rupert Hay. I acted for his father when he formed the company which took over his building business. He is an honourable man, who would and could pay any charges he incurred."

His audience nodded their appreciation of this important point.

"On the other hand, I doubt whether we are really equipped to handle this particular matter. It would be considerably outside the normal run of our business. I know this organisation—if that is the right word for it. It functions from that large double-fronted building at the end of North Street. They purchased it six months ago, from the Council. That they were able to do so argues that they are not short of money."

"I've seen the place," said Bracknell. "They've turned it into a regular fortress. A high wooden fence round it, with lots of barbed wire on top and bars on all the windows."

"It isn't a fortress," said Hugo. "It's a prison."

"That's just an assumption," said Tara. "The only message we've seen from the girl says she was happy."

"That was early days. She may, by now, be longing to get out."

"On the other hand," said Bracknell, "she may already have been systematically brainwashed. If you were allowed to speak to her she might simply say, 'I'm quite happy. Leave me alone.'"

"I've read about this brainwashing," said Tara. "How do they do it?"

"Different methods with different subjects. With a young and suggestible girl it may just be talk. Talk and argument. With a tougher subject, shortage of food and deprivation of sleep can be combined with the attachment of a headset through which a stream of propaganda can be poured into the victim's ear, night and day."

"You used the right word when you said victim," said Hugo, who was trying to control his feelings. "Not disciple, or adherent, or follower, but victim. Someone to be tortured into submission. Surely, surely, there's only one choice here." He swivelled his gaze between his father and Mr. Fearne. "We must do something before it's too late. It's our plain duty—"

"Our duty," said Fearne, drily, but not unkindly, "is to practice the law. Not to enforce it. Enforcement is the role of the police."

"Then we must alert the police to what is going on. If they knew that a girl was being refused access to her parents, squeezed out of her life's savings—surely they would take action. Drastic action, if necessary."

"Storm the place, you mean," said Bracknell. "If any such suggestion was made, I fancy they'd remember the Branch Davidians. They wouldn't want to end up with a mass suicide on their hands."

"You're missing the point," said Fearne. "No action of any sort could be taken by the police unless we could show that a crime had been committed. Our information, so far, shows nothing of the kind. This young lady, over the age of sixteen, has decided to spend her own money in her own way."

"Mightn't it be possible," suggested Tara, "to have her made a Ward of Court?"

This suggestion produced a thoughtful silence. The silence of professional people who are being asked to take a course of action which they understand in theory, but of which they have no practical experience.

"It's a matter of Chancery practice," said Fearne doubtfully. "One has to set up a settlement in favour of the young person con-

cerned. Some outside person has then to approach the Chancery Division and persuade them that the trust is not being administered to the advantage of the child. An application is then made for the child to be constituted a Ward of Court and possibly for a public trustee to be appointed."

"And how long," said Hugo, "would all this take?"

"Chancery proceedings are never swift."

"Jarndyce versus Jarndyce," said Tara under her breath.

"There are forms and precedents that have to be followed. With help from counsel we might push it through in six months."

"By which time," said Hugo, "the girl will be a mindless cabbage."

Bracknell said, coldly, "Tara has suggested a course of action. It might be slow, but if it came off it would be effective. Now let's have your idea."

Hugo said, "The last thing these people want is publicity. Any publicity. Anything that brings them out into the open. Surely it *must* be a breach of the law to keep a young girl from her parents and persuade her to hand over her money. If we threatened to bring in the authorities, to stir up the whole matter, they would see that giving up Antonia would be a small price to pay."

"And how do you suggest," said Fearne, "that the threat should be made? In correspondence? A difficult letter to write, with more than a suggestion of blackmail in it."

Bracknell said, "It would clearly be more likely to be effective if the threat was made personally. And since it is your idea, Hugo, you are clearly the person to do it."

Hugo said, "Oh, certainly, yes."

He had an uncomfortable feeling that Tara was laughing at him.

Hugo strode up to the large, double-fronted building in North Street with an assumption of confidence that he was far from feeling. He jerked the bellpull beside the tall, iron-latticed gate. It seemed to be working, for he heard a deep tolling inside the house, but it produced no immediate reaction.

After waiting for a full minute he pulled the bell again and was about to do so for a third time when the front door swung open and two young men stepped out, both about Hugo's age, both shaven-headed and fit-looking.

The Sons of the Book.

They walked up to the gate without making any move to open it. The taller of the two, speaking through the bars, said, "Whatever you're selling, we've got plenty of it, so go away."

Hugo said, "I'm not a salesman and I have a message for your leader."

"If you're not a salesman, who are you and what do you want?"

"I am a lawyer. And I will tell you once more, and only once more, what I want. I want a word with whoever is in charge of this—" difficult to find the right word without being offensive—"this institution."

The two young men looked at each other. They were both smiling. The one who had spoken before said, "I hope that you have something to say that is of interest and importance. If not, you are taking a considerable risk by forcing your way in."

"I shall have to take a chance on that," said Hugo. He looked behind him as he did so. North Street, being residential, was never crowded. At that moment it was completely empty. He had an illogical feeling that he would have been happier if there had been a few people about.

"On your own head be it."

The second young man, who had not so far spoken, unfastened the gate—massive old-fashioned lock, Hugo noted, and bolts top and bottom.

The men stalked ahead of him up the path and opened the front door. It was an unremarkable front hall with a well-polished floor and furnished only with a prie-dieu in the corner. A gesture invited him to follow them upstairs.

At the top of the stairs they paused for a moment, as though listening. The house was almost entirely silent, but he thought he could hear a subdued murmur of sound from somewhere above, half recitation, half chanting, but so soft that it might have come from a great way off. Then a loud voice.

"He may enter."

Hugo guessed that the room from which the voice came overlooked the front path and that he had been under observation from the moment he approached the house.

"Come in, come in," said the voice impatiently.

"The Lord of the Book grants you audience," said the young man. "We hope you are conscious of the privilege that is being accorded to you." The other young man nodded. Clearly he hoped so too. Hugo opened the door and went in.

It was a very ordinary study, or writing room, and its occupant, whom Hugo had expected to be a long-haired prophet dressed in a robe of some sort, turned out, disconcertingly, to be a tubby middle-aged man in a well-cut business suit.

He said, "I would invite you to sit down, but I have found, by bitter experience, that visitors who sit down tend to outstay their welcome. That is why I have had all other chairs removed. However, I am sure you will be able to deliver your message with reasonable speed."

Hugo, who had rehearsed his opening carefully, said, "I am a partner in the legal firm of Fearn and Bracknell. One of our clients is a certain Rupert Hay. You may have heard of him. He is very well known in these parts. A member of the Borough Council and chairman of the Watch Committee. He and his wife have consulted us on behalf of their daughter."

"She is, then, a young girl."

"She is sixteen years old."

"Old enough to have a mind of her own. Why did she involve her parents?"

"She did not involve them," said Hugo, conscious that he was being driven off his prepared track. "They have simply behaved like responsible parents. I understand that they have made two attempts to contact their daughter. One by telephone, one in person. In both cases they were refused access. It is contrary to the laws of this country to deprive a child of the protection of its parents."

"Being a lawyer, you will no doubt refer me to the precise statute or decided case which lays down this doctrine. A novel one to me."

"I am speaking of natural justice."

"Then you are talking nonsense. Natural justice is the last resort of the charlatan. You are wasting my time."

He must have made some signal because the door opened and the young men came in. There was a third man with them. The Lord of the Book was now standing.

He said, "This man is an impostor. Remove him."

Hugo's arms were gripped and twisted behind him. He realised at once that resistance would be futile. Both men were as strong or stronger than he was. The Lord of the Book regarded him impassively for a moment and then said, "You need not be gentle."

What followed was undignified.

With the two men holding him and a third close behind him he was hustled down the stairs, out along the path, and into the road. There he was frog-marched along the pavement. A series of jolts, from the knees of his captors, into the base of his spine caused him such acute agony that he was relieved when they reached the main road and deposited him in the gutter. He felt thankful for the small mercy that no one who knew him seemed to have witnessed his undignified arrival.

His gratitude was, in fact, premature.

The scene had been observed by someone who not only recognised him but was carrying a camera that he knew how to use and had taken two rapid pictures. This was Bertie Dillon, a young man who had recently joined the staff of the *Southwark Herald*, and it was his first opportunity to capture an important picture. He abandoned his intended assignment (the festivities attending the third wedding of an important local tradesman) and hurried back to the office bearing his spoils with him.

"You saw *what*?" said the editor.

"These three men had caught someone. I thought I recognised him. A man who works for Fearne and Bracknell. Fair hair and a broken nose."

"That sounds like Hugo Bracknell. So what were the three men doing to him?"

"They were sort of hustling him along. Frog-marching, we used to call it at school. Then they dropped him in the gutter."

"And you have photographs of it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you will destroy them."

"Destroy?"

"Burn them. Tear them up. Dump them in the rubbish bin."

"Er—Yes, sir."

"The men who carried out this assault. What did they look like? Short hair and combat jackets?"

"Yes, sir."

"As I thought. Sons of the Book, they call themselves. If they were honest—" the editor's face was by this time bright red "—they'd be wearing swastikas on their arms. A new sort of *Sturm abteilung*. A private army. I'll have no picture glorifying *them* in this paper."

"I'd no idea, sir—"

"Not long ago a number of them pushed their way into the bar of

the Black Prince, around closing time. Threw a Hitler salute—which the people in the bar, not unnaturally, objected to—and set about them. Not a fair fight, really. These people are trained in unarmed combat and the men they attacked had been drinking. On this occasion the butcher's bill was a broken arm and a fractured jaw—

"Surely, sir, the police—"

"Yes. They were charged. Pledged provocation. Got off with a fine. Which they could well afford to pay. They've got plenty of money, a lot of it extracted from old ladies they call on when they're alone in the house. Sons of the Book! Dregs of the earth. Rancid thugs."

Having got this off his chest the editor cooled down a degree or two. He said, "I'm sorry about your photographs, Bertie, but I can promise you this: Get a picture showing *them* in a compromising or humiliating position and I'll not only print it, I'll let you write the story."

Like all takers of pictures, Dillon considered himself an inspired writer of words. He said, "Thank you, sir. Thank you very much. I'll keep my eyes open."

When questioned by his father, Hugo simply said that he had had no luck. He had seen the prophet, who had refused to discuss Antonia. He said this with such firmness that his father, who suspected that something untoward had occurred, refrained from comment. Also, he wondered why his son was limping.

To Mr. Piggim, as he usually did when in trouble, Hugo told the whole story.

Mr. Piggim was a good listener. He said nothing until Hugo had finished, after which he remained silent for two whole minutes. Then he said, "You *were* asking for trouble, weren't you? Talking about 'natural justice.' What did he call it?"

"The last resort of the charlatan."

"Not bad. In fact, I rather agree with him. No, no. If you were going to base your argument on the law, you should have selected a more conclusive branch of it."

"Which branch do you suggest, Piggy?"

"The most detailed and generally accepted legal code is the one which governs the purchase and sale of houses. Preliminary Enquiries, Local Searches, Requisitions on Title—"

"Conveyancing, you mean. How does that come into it?"

"The house in North Street that these people bought used to belong to the Council. I was talking to old Stagg, their legal man, and he told me—I found it hard to believe—that the Lord of the Book, as he calls himself, did not employ a firm of solicitors. His idea seems to have been to save money. One of his young men—" Mr. Piggin snorted—"—had taken a law degree and this was thought to equip him to deal with a simple matter like buying a house. If you were looking for a chink in his armour, that's the place to concentrate on. I'll have to make a few enquiries—"

Mr. Piggin's enquiries seemed to be extensive and time-consuming and he was little in the office during the next two days. He renewed his dialogue with Mr. Stagg and stood him lunch. The early part of the evening he spent at the headquarters of the Southwark Rugby Football Club, accompanied by Rupert Hay, whose presence secured him respect and attention. On the following morning he was observed, once again, at the Borough Council offices, ascending on this occasion to the top story which was occupied by the Planning Department. Here he was among old friends, who were happy to enlighten him on a number of interesting points of procedure and practice.

By the afternoon of the second day he considered himself equipped for the contest.

When the Lord of the Book looked out the window and observed Mr. Piggin ambling up the path, he was angry. He said to the young man who stood beside his desk, "I thought that you and the others had succeeded in discouraging the legal fraternity. If I'd thought we were going to be bothered further, I'd have kept the gate locked."

"We hoped we had, sir."

"Then what does this one want?"

Mr. Piggin had rung the doorbell.

"Would you like us to deal with him?" The young man's face was alight with pleasurable anticipation.

"Yes. But remember, this is a much older man. You must not damage him severely."

"What I had in mind was that we might remove his trousers. Then, if he didn't take himself off smartly, we could use our towels."

"Towels?"

"At school we used to strip the new boys and flick them with

towels. It did no real harm, but if the towels had been dipped in water, they seemed to sting."

"Very well. You and the other two can stand by. But do nothing until I give the word."

When Mr. Piggin was admitted to the study he walked in sedately. He noted the boys who were standing in the passage outside the door, but they seemed to upset him less than the fact that when he got into the study there was no chair for him to sit on. However, after moving a couple of files to one side he was able to seat himself on a corner of the table.

He said, "It is kind of you to spare me a moment, Mr. Hegler."

"I have long abandoned that name. I am now addressed either as the Lord of the Book or, simply, as Prophet."

"In law a man can change his name as often as he wishes," said Mr. Piggin agreeably. "It is a fallacy to suppose that it requires a deed poll. However, that was not what I came to discuss. Allow me to put a few points to you—I think you'll find them interesting—about this spacious building that you purchased recently from the Council. I'm told that you did not employ solicitors yourself."

"I saw no reason to do so. One of my young men assured me that he could deal with any points which might arise."

"Including planning matters?"

This produced a moment of silence. Then the prophet said, "We were buying the house for our own occupation and use. We had no immediate intention of building on or adding to it—though our numbers are growing so fast that we may have to do so. In which case we should, of course, seek planning permission."

"I was not thinking of development," said Mr. Piggin, "but more of user."

"User?" The word seemed to hang for a moment in the air.

"North Street is a very select area. The houses in it are high-class buildings. Mostly in single occupation. On the other hand, the functions carried on here seem to me to be well outside what would normally be considered as residential."

"Perhaps. So what?"

"If you have, in fact, effected a change of user and consent has not been obtained, you could be in trouble. You could be forced to discontinue whatever is now being carried on here. And since you have been operating illegally for several months, there could be a substantial fine."

Before the prophet could speak, Mr. Piggin added, "I should not

wish to make too much of this. I have spoken, off the record, to certain members of the Planning Department. Their view is clear. Houses, they realise, are used for a number of purposes which are not strictly residential. They cannot inspect every house in the Borough. Provided there is no complaint, from neighbours or members of the public, they are prepared to accept the position. But once a complaint is lodged, they are forced to examine the matter."

"And when they find, as they will, that we are simply housing a number of residents—?"

"There is surely a little more to it than that."

"We shall be prepared to defend any action that the planning authorities might bring."

"It will be an interesting case," said Mr. Piggin with a smile.

He had moved from his perch on the table and was now standing by the window.

"No doubt," he continued, the smile still lingering, "when you made your purchase, you inspected the house."

"Of course. It was empty and our surveyors were able to make a thorough structural examination."

"Did it not seem odd to you that all of the upper-story windows, but none of the ground-floor ones, should have been barred?"

"Odd, perhaps, but useful. As you see, we have added bars on the ground floor too. We discourage unauthorised visitors."

"Then you made no enquiry as to what use the Council had made of the house before you purchased it?"

For the first time the prophet looked uneasy. Angry, as well, but there was a worm of uneasiness under the anger. There was something upsetting in Mr. Piggin's deliberate delivery.

He said, "We didn't consider the matter important. And now, if you've quite finished—"

"But surely," said Mr. Piggin, "if a complaint is made, you will be forced to argue—at a public hearing—that the use to which *you* are now putting the house is basically no different from that of its *previous* user. A hearing of that sort will be widely reported, and I cannot help feeling that such a contention may give rise to a certain amount of hilarity."

"Oh, why?"

The word was spat out from between tightly closed lips.

"You were not aware then that the previous use was—if I may

use the old term—as a lunatic asylum. What, as boys, we called a loony-bin.”

The anger which had been heating up as Mr. Piggin proceeded with his leisurely disquisitions now boiled over.

“I’ve had enough of your impertinence. Standing there, lecturing me on the law. So we’re in danger, are we? Have you any idea what danger you stand in yourself?”

Mr. Piggin said, “If you are contemplating treating me in the outrageous way you treated young Bracknell, I’d advise you to look out the window. The eight men you can see on the pavement are the larger, and rougher, members of the Southwark Rugby Football Club. They would, I am sure, resent any attack on myself and would be likely to respond in kind. I do not know who would come out on top in such a confrontation, but before you decide to provoke it, take a look at the ninth man. The rather smaller one, standing at the back. You see him? He is on the staff of the *Southwark Gazette* and he has brought his camera with him. A picture of a sanguinary encounter in this respectable street would sell a lot of copies of the paper, but it might also lead directly to the unfortunate results I mentioned earlier.”

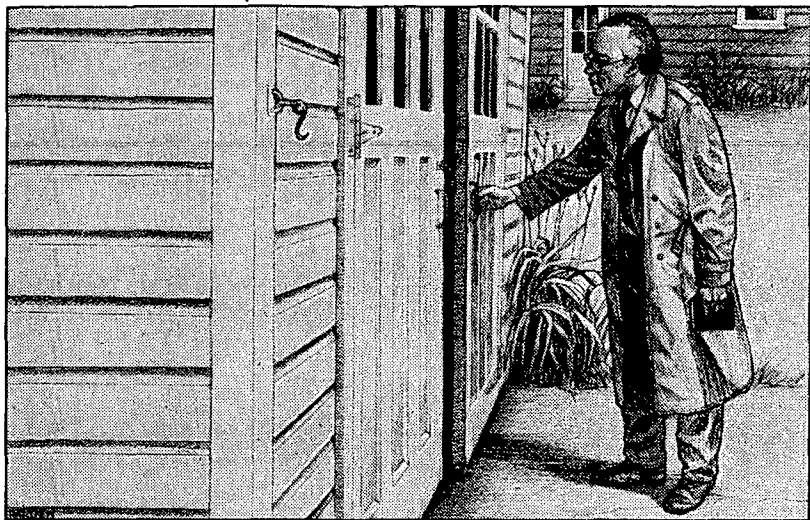
It was clear that this final threat had pierced the prophet’s armour. He reverted promptly to the businessman. Returning to his chair he sat down, extracted a cheque book from the drawer, and said, “How much?”

“I don’t follow you.”

“I imagine you want money. How much do I have to pay to prevent you going to the planners?”

“Money doesn’t enter into it,” said Mr. Piggin, virtuously. “I am not a blackmailer. I should be quite satisfied if you dismissed your recent recruit, Antonia Hay. I suggest you inform her that, in the short time she has been here, her character has demonstrated its unsuitability for her to be a member of your organisation.”

“She was furious at the reason given for her expulsion,” said Rupert Hay to Mr. Bracknell. “Absolutely furious. But, in her heart of hearts, deeply relieved. Not only at getting clear, but at salvaging most of her money. When General Crispin mentioned your name to me, do you know what he said? ‘Not a lot of legal nonsense about them, but eminently practical.’” ●



FAMILY PLOT

by Ralph McInerney

My mother ended her days in a nursing home, her "things" reduced to the contents of a cedar chest covered with a cloth that had once adorned our piano bench. Pudgy and distracted, the pinkish wig she affected slightly askew, she endured these visits much as I did myself. I marveled at how slowly my weekly hour passed. Time in the nursing home was as leaden as in the lecture hall.

The cedar chest held documents, painted china plates, hundreds of photographs randomly melded and held by rubber bands, letters, the linen with which she had covered the dining room table at Thanksgiving and Christmas, her silver. My baby book.

After she was gone, I transferred these things one by one, reverently, into boxes. Not to save it, but to give it a decent burial. The diaries were at the bottom of the chest and came as a surprise. There were four of them, school notebooks, eight by eleven, with stiff cardboard covers and bound with spiraled steel. Three were

full of my mother's elegant if minuscule hand; the fourth was largely empty—only the opening eight pages, were written on. I read the last notebook first, perhaps because it promised to be less of a chore. I say first, though I had no intention of reading them all. I might so easily not have read any of them. Didn't I first put them into a box without looking into them and then, feeling bad about it, take them out again? I sat there in her little stuffed chair and read what she had written during the spring of my seventh year. It was an amazing revelation.

I had had a sister of whom I knew nothing, stillborn one March evening in my mother's bed in the house on 27th Avenue in Minneapolis where we then lived. The dead child had been taken outside by my father and the doctor and buried in the garage. No official notice of the birth was made. Those were simpler days. Why need others know that my sister had not quite made it into the land of the living?

Nearly fifty years have passed since the event dispassionately recorded by my mother on the second page of the fourth volume of her diary. My reaction is difficult to describe, and of course I cannot now separate it from my mother's subsequent reflections. She brooded over what had happened; apparently my father blamed the doctor and became impatient with her sadness, taking it to suggest that he had done something wrong. A religious woman, my mother was more interested in her stillborn daughter's soul than her body. Conditional baptism should have been administered, perhaps a religious ceremony and burial in consecrated ground. She referred to the baby as Vivian.

With my finger I could easily smudge the penciled words, yet they already looked as remote as a medieval manuscript. Nonetheless, the notebook rested on my lap as I sat in my mother's chair, in the present every bit as much as I was. The notebooks did not go into the boxes. I kept them. I read them all eventually and,

"Although he is best known to the general public as the author of the Father Dowling mysteries," says William DeAndrea in *Encyclopedia Mysterosa*, "McInerney is also . . . author, editor, or translator of fifteen volumes of religious philosophy." That fact may explain why questions of faith enter so interestingly into his mystery stories, as in this new tale. ¶

evocative as the others were, stirring up from time to time memories of my own, it was the account of Vivian's birth in the last volume that engaged me. Eventually, it would obsess me. Unlike with my mother, it was not my sister's soul that haunted me, but her bones buried beneath the floor of that garage in south Minneapolis.

The garage floor had not been paved but was covered with cinders. It was a flat-roofed structure, with two windows looking toward the house through the flowers in the box beneath them. There was a rock garden in the corner formed by the garage and a lilac bush that marked the edge of our yard, a jumble of boulders cemented together forming a kind of miniature mountain above the scalloped pool, into which water was meant to flow from a pipe that had dried and rusted over before we rented the house. The roof of the garage was edged by a foot-high raised rim which framed its tarpaper surface. Using the rock garden and the window box, I could scramble on top of the garage and lie there, concealed by the raised rim. It was my secret place. I think of myself now, lying on that sun-warmed roof while below me, beneath the floor of the garage, the tiny body of my sister lay.

I have the habit, bequeathed me by my mother, of visiting the graves of departed relatives on Memorial Day. On November second, I have a Mass said for the repose of their souls. My mother made me solemnly promise to continue this practice when she was gone; it was a promise easily made if not easily kept, since it entailed an annual journey to Minnesota. Why didn't my mother mention Vivian to me then?

My mother died in October. The following May, when I made my memorial visit to Minneapolis, I located the house on 27th Avenue. I drove past it several times in my rented car. The house was smaller than I remembered it and wore a surprised look in its high windows. The screen porch ran the width of it, the oak still rose behind the house; I saw the window of the room in which I had felt such pleasant sadness on Christmas Eve wondering what the morning would bring.

There was an alley behind the house, and I drove down it as well, stopping at the point where my father would have turned in. The garage ran parallel with the alley. Its windowless doors were closed. I felt an urge to get out of the car and look into the garage through the windows on the side facing the house. But I put the car in gear and continued up the alley and, after going by once more in the street, continued on to the airport.

I began to dream of renting that house, even buying it, and

exhuming my sister's body. The body had been swaddled in blankets when the two men took it across the yard and into the garage. Did one of them hold it while the other dug? My father would have done the digging. He was an artist whose life had been diverted into business; he worked for an architect as a draftsman and his work was widely praised, to his embarrassment. Engineering drawings were not what he had dreamt of excelling at. In the attic of the house, there was a drawing board, a palette, used tubes of paint, brushes, and books into which he had pasted drawings and photographs and anything that might inspire his own work. After he retired, he tried to do watercolors but after a few months gave it up.

"We only get one life," he observed.

My sister hadn't even got that, not really. How long had she been dead in my mother's womb before that March evening when she came forth only to be carried out to the garage and buried under its cinder floor?

My father hadn't been complaining. I think he was glad to give up the thought that he had to learn to excel at something else at his age. In any case, he had only a year to live. Chances are I will live into old age, as my mother did. Someday I may end up in a nursing home as she did, but there will be no child of my own to pay dutiful visits every week. Vivian seemed to be all I had in the world, and she was as dead as my parents. But in her case it was different. Eventually I decided what I would do.

I would exhume her body and have it transferred to a plot near my parents'. I would have a stone put up and on it have engraved her name and the date that marked both her birth and her death. This seemed a commission I had received from my mother, an act of family *pietas* that would give more meaning to my life than the plaque I received from the dean or the captain's chair the president presented to me bearing the seal of the institution on its curved back. The president spoke at length of my career, but he was new to the campus, only three years in office.

My task was quixotic, I recognized that. The straightforward thing would be to approach the Minneapolis authorities, tell them my story, and receive authorization to exhume the body. Armed with that, I could call on the occupant of the house and ask permission to go ahead. The sexton of the cemetery could then make the necessary arrangements. A priest would come and pray over the white casket I would buy for my sister and then it would be

lowered into the ground. At that moment, I imagined, my mother would be at peace at last.

If I didn't proceed in that way it was because I wanted first to make sure that a body indeed was there. My mother had the habit of embellishing the dull world in which she dwelt. She had told me that I was directly descended from the Benjamin Rush who signed the Declaration of Independence. She told me that one of my great-aunts had been married to a Methodist bishop who lost his faith and dove from the top of the Foshay Tower into the upturned faces of the terrified crowd. She herself, she said, had spent two years in France as a girl but had forgotten every word of the language after a bout with scarlet fever. My father had turned down a scholarship at the Walker Art Center in order to marry her. None of these things was true. These antic claims prepared me for her behavior in the nursing home.

The wig she wore covered a full head of beautiful silvery hair but she insisted that she was bald as an egg. St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, often visited her, and during these visions my mother remembered her French. She was perfectly willing to pass on the contents of her conversations with the saint who had said she wanted to spend her eternity raining roses on the earth.

These imaginative flights came in later life, of course, but were somehow connected, I now realized, to the sadness of her stillborn daughter. The initial diary entry was so matter-of-fact, simply what had happened. Only later did her misgivings begin. Nonetheless, I wanted to make certain the entry was factual before I enlisted the help of the authorities in Minneapolis.

Mine was an unenviable task. Two weeks after I became professor emeritus, I drove to Minneapolis, across Ohio and Indiana, through Chicago, and then northwest on I-94. I stopped overnight in Madison and called a colleague and had a nice chat. I did not tell him I was calling from only miles away. Told of my retirement, he insisted that he himself would not go gentle into that dark night.

"They'll have to cart me off in a box," he cried, and I could tell by his tone that he did not yet believe that he would ever die.

Once when I was a boy, my parents took me to a wake, the lugubriousness of which my father had complained of in the car going home.

"If I ever die," he began, and then fell silent.

My mother looked at him and I waited too. Only later did I real-

ize why he had not gone on. That must have been the moment when his own death ceased to be a mere hypothesis for him.

In Minneapolis I rented a room in a motel near the airport, unpacked, took a nap, and then drove into the city limits to Minnehaha Falls. The steps I descended to the bottom of the ravine where the falling water became the creek again, flowing on a few miles to the Mississippi, were surely the same ones I had gone up and down on as a boy. Above the falls, there was still the statue in the middle of the creek, Hiawatha with Minnehaha in his arms, her bare metal breast exposed to my wondering child's eye. The intervening years seemed insignificant. I was glad I had come.

The next day I drove to the house, parked at the curb in front of it, and sat for a moment, made dizzy by the memories that came. Between two houses, the branch library on 28th Avenue was visible. On summer evenings my father had sent me to Howie's Ice Cream Store to buy Baker's chocolate bars. It was our very special treat.

I went up to the house and knocked on the screen door of the porch, then stood there self-consciously waiting. All the openings I had rehearsed seemed idiotic now. "Hello, I used to live in this house as a kid. Would you mind if I look around?" Why not just ask if I could go out to the garage and dig up the floor.

I knocked several times, but no one answered. I walked around the house. Next door a woman was hanging up clothes.

"They're not home," she called. "They both work."

"I know." I opened my coat, as if to pull something from my inside pocket. "Insurance."

Her mouth rounded in feigned comprehension. But I was drawn across the lawn toward the garage. The rock garden was still there, water piddling from its pipe and filling the blue-bottomed pool. I brought my hands to the side of my face as I leaned forward and looked through the windows. I could see nothing. I stood for a moment, looking back at the house in an appraising way, and then continued around the garage.

The doors were closed, the latch pulled over the metal loop, but no padlock had been slipped through the ring. Swiftly I opened one of the doors, wide, to let the light in. I stared at the floor, then went inside to make sure. The floor was of cement.

After lunch at a place called the Canteen I returned to my motel and lay on the bed, telling myself that the now-paved floor of the garage relieved me of any duty I had toward my dead sister's remains. No vault could be more secure than her resting place

beneath the cement floor of the garage. "Rest in peace, Vivian," I breathed. "Rest in peace."

I awoke from my nap, bringing into consciousness what I had dreamed. When the floor of the garage was paved, a body had been found. Of course the police had been brought in, the bones had been taken away, an okay was given to proceed with the paving of the floor, and my sister now lay in a pauper's grave. It seemed certain to me that in the course of preparing the floor of the garage for that cement, the remains would have been discovered. How deep could my father have dug that melancholy night?

Lying on the motel bed, I asked myself how I should proceed. Not by way of consulting the authorities. That now seemed the course of last resort. I must find out when the garage floor had been paved, by whom, and if anything unusual had happened at the time. Armed with a date, I could consult newspapers of the time. As I lay there, considering my problem, I remembered what an event it had been when new sidewalks were laid when I was a boy. A contractor, always a Swede or at least Scandinavian, would arrive in a truck behind which he towed a cement mixer mounted on two wheels. It would be detached from the truck and bricks put under the tongue to keep it level, a trough and hoe and bags of cement and a load of sand would appear, and buckets of water. The cement mixer made a terrible noise, but rhythmic, syncopated. There was actually a tune when I was a young man, with the recurrent line, "Cement mixer, putsy, putsy." Anyone who had heard the clatter of such a machine knew immediately what the words were intended to convey.

I got up from my bed, drove to the house on 27th Avenue, got out, and inspected the sidewalk. It was old and cracked, the slabs rocked when walked on. In the corner of the slab was the name of the contractor, pressed into the still-wet cement after it had been smoothed. A. J. Anderson & Sons. It seemed fitting that Anderson should have sons. Before I got back into my car, the screen door of the porch opened and a man came out. He walked deliberately down the steps and confronted me. He folded his arms and lowered his head.

"You the insurance man?"

"No."

He frowned and looked toward the house next door where the woman had been hanging out her wash.

"I lied," I explained. "I used to live in this house."

"What do you want? Are you looking for something?"

He was maybe forty, slightly more. I said, "At my age you start wanting to reconstruct things, see what they were really like."

"She said you looked in the garage."

"It was my favorite place when I was a kid. I used to climb up on the roof and hide." He reacted to my words as to an invasion of his territory, and in a way that's what they were. "When we lived here, the floor of the garage was just cinders. Now it's paved."

"It's always been paved."

"Not always. I wonder if Anderson did it?" I pointed to the name sunk in the sidewalk.

"What the hell difference does it make?"

"None."

"He sure didn't do much of a job on this sidewalk." He made one of the concrete squares wobble beneath his foot.

I apologized for acting so mysterious and thanked him for his patience. This mellowed him somewhat. "You want to look around inside?"

"I don't want to impose."

"Come on."

He started toward the house and I followed him. The fact was, I had no interest in the interior of the house. Obviously it had been redecorated many times since we had lived there. There had been a pantry in the kitchen but that had become an alcove containing a table and chairs and, in the corner, a television set. I went upstairs, where there were only two bedrooms. Mine had been in the back with the oak tree blocking one of the windows. In the bathroom there had been a duck motif on the wall over the bathtub but that was gone. I looked into the front bedroom that had been my parents' and where the bed in which Vivian had come stillborn into the world had stood.

Downstairs, the wife asked me when it had been that I lived in the house and seemed surprised that it had even been in existence all those years ago. Of course, neither she nor her husband had been born then.

"My mother gave birth to my sister in the front bedroom upstairs."

"At home!"

"It was an emergency."

I watched them closely but they did not give any indication that this held any significance for them, apart from the oddity of a woman's giving birth in her own bed in her own house. Of course that had been rare even then, but not unheard of. If my mother

had been taken to a hospital, the birth would have been recorded, she would have felt no guilt, she would have made no diary entry, probably, and I would not be standing here in a kitchen where we had all spent so much time all those years ago, talking to strangers about events that could mean nothing to them.

When I left, it was with the sense that I could not go back again. They had indeed been patient with me because of course my visit was unique, a single inconvenience. In the car, I had the mad thought that I should go back and tell them the whole truth of why I had come and see what their reaction would be. But imagine a stranger telling you that a child lies buried under the floor of your garage. Could I just sound them out on their willingness to bring in a crew and tear up the floor to see if we could locate the remains of my sister? It was sufficient to think this to know what their reaction would be. I drove back to the motel with the sense that I had failed in my mission.

In the Yellow Pages I looked up cement contractors, running my finger up through the Petersons, Petersens, Olsons, Olsens, Johnsons, and then the Andersons. There was no A. J. among the seven contracting Andersons. I began systematically to dial all the numbers. I got busy signals, no answer, several who said that no, they didn't know any A. J. Anderson in the business.

"What's the A. J. stand for?"

"I don't know. He did some sidewalks on 27th Avenue."

"When was that?"

"Oh, a long time ago."

"How long?"

"Maybe forty years."

"Jesus Christ."

The next Anderson I called responded immediately. "A. J.'s been dead for years."

"Weren't his sons in business with him?"

"You want Jensen."

"Jensen?"

"Omar Jensen. He married A. J.'s granddaughter."

Omar Jensen was located on the south side, off the Crosstown. I decided to drive over there. I found a prosperous enterprise. A one-story building with offices in front, in back a garage and warehouse. There were several of the huge truck-mounted mixers that drive around until the product is ready to pour. I parked in the visitor's spot in front of the office and went in. A counter, the aroma of cigarettes, a woman at a computer who called out with-

out looking at me that she'd just be a minute. I told her I had all the time in the world. Eventually, she pushed away from the computer, uttering a profanity.

"That damned computer," she said, clearly expecting me to share her estimate. I shook my head ambiguously. "What can I do you for?"

"I'm told that you can help me find an A. J. Anderson who was a cement contractor here in Minneapolis forty years ago."

"I can tell you where he's buried. That was my grandfather."

"You're Mrs. Jensen?"

"Don't rub it in. And don't say this marriage is set in concrete either."

"People say those things?"

"Not people, relatives. Did you know my grandfather?"

"He put in the sidewalk in front of a house I lived in on 27th Avenue when I was a kid."

She waited for me to say more. "Yeah?"

"Let me ask you a question first. Did you ever feel an impulse to visit some place where you were a kid?"

"No. But then I wouldn't have to. I'm living now pretty much where I have all my life."

"I wondered if your grandfather laid the cement floor of the garage at that address."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"I could tell you if this blasted computer worked. My brother entered all the records going clear back through my grandfather into the computer. I tell it the address, bingo, I know what we did and when. That's the theory."

"What program do you use?"

"Do you know anything about computers?"

"Want me to take a look?"

I went around the counter and she made way for me. "You get that thing running and you can have all the information you want."

There was a program in residence which impeded calling up the data base until it had been exited. I saw that right away, but I sat frowning at the machine and after a minute she went into the office behind the counter. I brought up the database, got into the subdirectory of A. J. Anderson & Sons, and entered 4034 27th Avenue. A little grinding but then it came. A. J. had done the sidewalk seven years after we moved out of the house. And then I had it. Garage floor: July 17, 1956. There was nothing to indicate

there had been any complications in the job. When Mrs. Jensen came out I said, casually, that I had found the trouble. I thought she was going to kiss me.

"What was that you wanted to know?"

"I already looked it up."

"And?"

"No luck."

The following morning I checked the newspapers for the month of July, 1956, and into August. There was nothing about a body having been found buried in a garage in south Minneapolis. I pushed away from the table. Now I could go to the authorities and put into effect my straightforward plan.

I began with the sexton of the cemetery. He dwelt in a squat brick building set in a vee created when the narrow road that brought me from the highway through rows of graves bifurcated, one branch leading to what had once been a new section. Propped against the desk at which he sat was a gravestone on which was engraved—grave, engraved, odd conjunction—Tom Chorzempa, Sexton, 1983—. A more standard nameplate on the desk bore the same legend without dates.

"The stonecutter did that for me," he said. He held his sandwich suspended between the opened foil wrapper on the desk and his mouth. "As a joke."

"Good work."

"I've seen you before." He dipped to meet his sandwich halfway and took an enormous bite from it. He chewed with great deliberateness and undisguised pleasure. He was thin as a rail, as my mother would have put it, a skeleton over which leathery flesh had been draped. The ends of his moustache fell below the line of his jaw. Large dark eyes studied me as he chewed.

"My mother was buried here a few months ago."

"Name of?"

"Rush."

"The new section." A thought occurred to him and he sat forward. "Anything wrong?"

I explained why I had come. My sister was buried elsewhere in the city and I wanted her body transferred here, next to my mother. There was a place there, destined for me, something I learned when I was making arrangements in this very office for my mother's burial. Chorzempa responded with encouraging nods, as if to assure me that my request was not unusual.

"What cemetery she in?"

"That's the problem."

He forgot his sandwich while he listened to my account. He forgot to close his mouth. He seemed to have forgotten how to talk. Finally he spoke.

"That is a problem."

But one that galvanized him. He called the coroner, apparently a friend, smoothing the way for my visit. Blatz, the coroner, had a police detective with him when I arrived for my appointment, a cheerful man with rimless glasses and pinkish eyes. While I spoke, Blatz looked at Fremont, the detective, as if seeking guidance from his reaction.

"We'll dig up the floor," Fremont said.

"I'll pay for it."

Fremont's dimples deepened when he smiled. "This will be a police investigation. It's illegal to bury bodies on your property."

"My parents are both dead."

Fremont waved this away. He seemed attracted by the unusual nature of my request. I asked about the current occupants. A court order would quell their misgivings. I felt I was betraying them, but I was exhilarated by the fact that what I had come to do seemed now within the realm of possibility.

"Can I be there when you dig?"

"I insist on it. You're there to identify the body."

His expression told me that this was meant only to permit my presence. Fremont understood that I had never seen my sister.

Mrs. Stoeffel stayed home from work so she could be there while the police tore up the floor of her garage. She would not speak to me, scarcely acknowledging my greeting. The sound of the jackhammer split the morning air, amplified by the open doors of the garage. People began to arrive from various directions, attracted by the noise, the truck, and the marked car in which Fremont arrived. My car was parked on the street outside. I had waited in it until Fremont and the crew he had borrowed from street maintenance were in place in the alley behind the house. A colleague of Fremont's from the police lab began scanning the floor with an instrument designed to pick up indications of what lay below the surface.

"You don't know where the body is?" Fremont asked and I said I didn't. "The whole thing, Ben," he ordered.

Ben began at the deepest point of the garage and moved systematically towards those of us standing in the doorway. After a few minutes, a clicking sound was heard. He moved his instrument

and it stopped, he returned it to the original spot, and the clicking began again.

"Try here," he said.

The jackhammer went into action and soon loose concrete could be removed with picks and shovels and carted off to the truck, although the jackhammer was called into service from time to time.

The ground beneath the cement, where it hadn't been disturbed by the hammer or the workmen's tools, was packed as smooth as the covering concrete had been. There was no trace of the cinders I had remembered. I must have thought the cinder floor would be there intact once the concrete was removed. After several hours, the entire area of the garage floor was exposed. Fremont took a shovel from the workman and began himself to remove the soil, working very carefully. Blatz stood by, chewing gum.

Fremont lifted dirt carefully and placed it on a large piece of canvas spread for the purpose. An archeologist could not have shown more care. From time to time, Fremont would crouch and delicately brush away dirt with his gloved hand. Several pieces of cinder were removed in this way. The first signs of a body were found two feet beneath the surface. A hand. But it was the hand of an adult.

There is a poem of John Donne's in which he speaks of the bracelet of bright hair about the bone that will be found if he is ever disinterred, a tress of his beloved that had been wound round his living wrist. There was a ring on the hand that Fremont first encountered. He did not remove it so that eventually, when the bones had been reassembled on the canvas, the ring seemed an ironic comment on the condition of its wearer. The portions of clothing that had fallen free of the body and survived were placed carefully on the canvas too. The medical examiner's van had been summoned by Blatz, and photographs were being taken. The garage had become the scene of a crime. And I had become an object of suspicion.

"Is this what you wanted me to find?" Fremont asked.

"I'm as surprised as you are."

"He's been there a long time."

"Would you have Ben try to locate my sister with that machine?"

Fremont looked at me, as if surprised that I was persisting in my original story. After a moment, he said, "Okay," and went over to the technician.

The clicking Ben eventually elicited from a spot beneath the

double windows was faint but, he became convinced, definitive. He told Fremont.

"Let's wait until this one is taken care of."

I resented the wait but on the other hand I did not want my private ceremony eclipsed by this dramatic discovery. My sister's bones were scarcely a foot beneath the surface, and they made a modest find compared to the adult body. Blatz and the medical examiner looked over Vivian's fragile remains and okayed their removal. Two days later I stood beside a priest as he read some prayers over the little white casket that was then lowered into the ground beside my mother. Chorzempa was there too.

"That's it," Father O'Connell said, closing his book with the hand that held it. He seemed to wish he could provide something more. I thanked him. He put the envelope I gave him in his book and walked off with the sexton. I stood for a moment longer and then I too left.

My act of piety was complete. I had fulfilled my mother's wishes; my stillborn sister now lay in consecrated ground, and I hoped that somewhere the two of them rested more peacefully. The class ring was from the University of Minnesota and there were initials inside the band: J. J. O. The year on the ring led me to the list of graduates. J. J. O. was the Dr. O'Brien who had attended the birth of my sister. His skull suggested that he had been struck with what might have been a shovel. Those were the elements of the puzzle.

What had transpired the night of Vivian's stillbirth that led to Dr. O'Brien's ending in a grave near my sister's? Newspaper accounts of his mysterious disappearance went on for a time and there were several retrospects, one five years later, the other after a quarter-century. But it remained an unsolved mystery. I did not inform Fremont of the passage in my mother's diary that assumed new significance in the light of these findings:

"They must wait until the very end when all shall rise and then our secrets will be known as God has known them all along."

They. Our secrets. The sentence seemed carefully constructed, making it impossible to regard it as only an expression of my mother's faith.

The past is neither distant nor gone. Like the hidden strata of the earth beneath its visible crust, what was is contemporary with what is and with what will be. ●

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

by Patricia Hall

It always made Beryl smile when she saw how well Enid's delphiniums did in the bed in the corner where they had buried Dennis. Great tall spires in shades of blue. Dennis had liked blue, she recalled. She had bought him a blue sweater once, soft wool, that Air Force colour, blue-grey like his eyes. It must have been the Christmas before it happened. He'd opened it on Boxing Day, of course, because he hadn't been able to slip away on the day itself, but even so, he'd been pleased, she thought. He'd *said* he'd been pleased. And he'd worn it every time he came round after that. He'd even been wearing it on that last day, a soft cuddly blue sweater, a little shrunk by then because she'd washed it in water a bit too hot one time. He'd not been able to take it home of course. . . . Happy days.

There'd not been many happy days since, Beryl thought, as she washed up the tea things and put them on the draining board to dry. Her eyes filled up with tears as she watched the dirty water swirl away down the sink and arched her back to ease the pain, which had been bad that day. It wouldn't be long now, she thought, not long until Enid would realise who had won in the end.

She glanced in the mirror as she walked slowly and painfully out of the kitchen. She was getting very thin, she thought, quite haggard about the face, but that was only to be expected. It was the losing weight which had brought that instant look of alarm into the doctor's eyes when she had first consulted him. A man of not many words, and those reassuring enough as he wrote out the letter to the hospital, but he had not been able to hide that flash of fear, the knowledge that only he and Beryl shared, although she had never put it into words and never would. There were compensations, though. *She'd see.*

Beryl went back into the sitting room where her sister was sitting with her feet up on the sofa, glued to *Brookside*, a box of chocolates at her side. "Did you let the cat out?" Enid asked, not taking her eyes off the screen.

Beryl mumbled a response. There had been a dog years ago, a scruffy terrier which she had adopted—or perhaps he had adopted her—one night on the way home from work. He'd sat on the doorstep until, in the teeth of Enid's objections—she'd always been a catty person, not a doggy person, she said, endlessly—Beryl had let him in. They'd reported it to the police, of course, but no one claimed him and so he stayed.

In fact, if it hadn't been for Scruffy and the desultory walks she took him on, down to the park to let him root in the shrubbery, round the pond where he made angry little rushes at the ducks but refused to go in above his tummy, and across the grass to let him do what he had to do, past the shops to buy a paper and some sweets for Enid, and home again, she might never have met Dennis Cleave.

"Did you make me a cup of coffee?" Enid said in that querulous whine she had developed over the years. "Didn't I ask you to make a cup of coffee? You know it keeps me awake if you leave it too late."

Beryl had sat down carefully in the armchair on the other side of the fire. Now she eased herself just as carefully to her feet again without comment. They didn't talk much these days. There was really nothing that the two sisters had left to say to each other. Enid had taken her pension early and given up work and now sat, getting fatter, seldom venturing out. Beryl, older, growing grey and sticklike, waited on her, shopped and cooked, cleaned and paid the bills. She had no complaints. She knew how much worse it could have been. Even when Enid had decreed all those years ago that the dog Scruffy would have to go, that even little dogs can dig and digging was the one thing they could not risk, Beryl had made no complaint. The alternative was too awful to think about. But it had gnawed at her guts over the years, until now it was gnawing her to death.

And of course, when Enid retired, they had got a cat, a nasty sly creature which treated Beryl with disdain. But Enid liked it and it seemed to like Enid. It sat on her lap and purred as she endlessly stroked its silky hair, its whole body vibrating with an almost sexual pleasure, claws out of sight, tail twitching gently. Two of a kind, Beryl had decided as she fed it and filled its water bowl and let it in and out, indulging herself in a kick now and again when her sister wasn't looking. Horrid creatures, cats.

It was odd how firm Enid had been about the garden. That was her domain, she insisted. Beryl was to look after the house and she would look after the garden. That was fair, wasn't it? Not

really, Beryl thought sourly as she hobbled back into the kitchen and put the kettle on. It was, after all, a tiny garden and she did not believe Enid gained much pleasure from her obsessive planting and weeding and pruning. It had much more to do with keeping her away from Dennis, she was sure. Even now she could not stomach the idea that Beryl might have attracted a man, even so late in the day, when she, a good eight years younger but not so pretty—everyone said so—had not.

"I was pretty," Beryl said to herself, not realising that she had spoken aloud. She spooned coffee into the pot. "I was pretty. Dennis said so. He wouldn't have looked at me otherwise."

She felt rather than heard her sister behind her.

"Whinging again, are we?" Enid asked. She moved surprisingly quietly for one so gross. "Whinging on about dear Dennis? Well, you lost him, didn't you, dear, in more ways than one?"

Beryl turned away, although she knew there was no escape. There had never been any escape from Enid. Even when they were kids, almost as soon as she could walk and talk, Enid had been in charge. For just that short sweet time, it had been different, before Enid found out, before she began to suspect and pry and finally came home one afternoon with a migraine, she said, although there'd never been a migraine before or since. She'd found them in bed together.

"Come on, let's hear you say it," Enid said. "You lost him. To me."

Beryl pressed her lips tight shut and picked up the kettle, ready to pour the boiling water into the pot.

"Say it," Enid said, suddenly harsh. "Say it." She took hold of Beryl's hand, so thin now it was almost a claw, and pushed it momentarily against the side of the kettle. "Say it."

Beryl pulled away with a gasp. She was determined that she would not cry out. She had never cried out, not on that first day when Enid had thrown a tantrum and Dennis had fled in confusion, fastening his trousers as he rushed down the stairs, nor even on the last day, the day he didn't go home. But she would have to say it, or there would be worse than a small pink burn on her hand.

"I lost him to you," she said, quietly. God help me, she thought, and you, you vicious, vindictive cow.

"He really fancied me, you know," Enid said smugly, spooning three teaspoons of sugar into her coffee. "Do you remember that silky mauve shirt I had? He really liked that. Liked to run his fingers over it. . . ."

Beryl eased herself out of the kitchen, teeth clenched, fists in a

tight ball. She could not lay a finger on Enid, she knew that, even if she could have found the strength. Her sister was not stupid. She had made her dispositions soon after they had dug that pit under the flower bed and eased Dennis Cleaves's stiffening body into the makeshift grave. Certainly not stupid, Beryl thought. Very, very clever, in fact. Though perhaps in the end not clever enough.

It had been Enid's idea to keep hold of Dennis's keys and find his car. He never parked right outside the house, of course—just in case, he said, with that knowing, bright smile which melted her inside. But they'd found his Escort easily enough a couple of streets away, outside the corner grocer's, later on that night when the streets were dark and deserted, and they'd driven in convoy all that way to Scarborough, Enid driving Dennis's car slowly and a bit jerkily with Beryl close behind in their little Metro. Beryl had been shaking so much by then that she'd hardly been able to change gear, but they'd got there in the end and left his car in the car park by the north beach, out of sight, out of mind, as Enid had said.

They read in the local paper later that week that a local man, an estate agent, had disappeared from home and his car had been found on the coast. And that had been that. Easy really, Enid had said with satisfaction, but that bloody dog would have to go. Dogs dig up bones, after all, it's a well-known fact. They couldn't risk his scrabbling little paws, could they?

Beryl lay awake that night as she often did now. She nursed her pain and a secret glee that she could not reveal the faintest sign of during daylight hours. And she thought about Dennis. A weak man, she had concluded in the end, and perhaps she had suspected as much all along. A man for the main chance, and in the beginning she had obviously been the main chance. A woman crying out for it, as Enid had so rudely put it in one of their coruscating rows after she had found out about the affair.

But it hadn't seemed like that at the time. At first they had simply strolled together in the park with Scruffy. He could be out of his office at all sorts of times of the day, he said, with that smile and those innocent wide blue eyes. He had plenty of excuses for going home late from work to the wife and children on the other side of town. An affair, he implied, was easy for him—if she fancied him as much as he fancied her. . . .

And there wasn't much doubt about that, Beryl thought bitterly. And really and truly it should have been easy for her too. She was unmarried, unattached, with a good job and a half share in her own house. And not unattractive then, for God's sake, attractive

even, in a pale, fair way, she'd heard people say. Why should she not take a lover? Everyone else seemed to. But deep down she knew it would not be easy at all if Enid found out, as Enid inevitably would.

There'd been silences, long hurt and hurtful silences. Scruffy had been shut out of the house for days at a time. Meals which she'd said she'd cook did not appear. Chores she'd undertaken were not done, and the house became dusty and unkempt. She'd felt quite ashamed at asking Dennis in, never quite sure what she'd find.

What she found in the end, of course, was Dennis in the kitchen with Enid, wrapped in her huge and warm embrace. He had his back to her, and Enid's triumphant eyes caught hers over his shoulder and they said, "I've won." She did not remember much after that, though she had to believe what Enid told her. She had picked up the knife and lunged at Dennis from behind. And although the moment of impact—or impacts, Enid said, six, seven, eight frenzied blows—had been wiped somehow from her conscious mind, she could certainly remember the aftermath, the blood on the kitchen floor, the stiffening body half under the table, and the frantic digging in the garden in the rain.

Beryl had never wept for Dennis. He had been a vain and foolish man, she knew *that* now, a fond lover but weak and easily led. Betrayal was his stock in trade, she knew that now, aware of the ease with which he had slipped into his adultery with her and into Enid's capacious arms when the chance offered. She should have turned her back and walked away, would have turned her back and walked away, perhaps, if it had not been for that look of triumph in Enid's eyes. *That* had been the trigger, she thought, *that* had been the spur. If Beryl could not have him, then Enid wouldn't either.

Beryl died, as she knew she would, passing away quietly in her sleep, causing no one any trouble. Enid stirred herself just enough to organise a plain but decent funeral and settled down to enjoy her small inheritance. It was several weeks later that she was disturbed one morning by a ring at the front door. Two men in plain-clothes stood there and behind them Enid could see men in dark overalls getting out of a white police van with picks and spades.

"We have authority to search your house and garden," they said, oblivious to the panic which seized her.

"How?" she asked. "Why? Why now?" But she knew, of course, and for the first time in many years thought she heard her sister Beryl laughing. ●

ACT OF KINDNESS

by Martin Edwards

"D

o you know they used to call this place the Dying Dale?" asked Bryan Lillis.

He waved in the direction of the valley that stretched out below their hillside garden. The impish smile on his face reminded his wife Nancy of the way he had looked when she first met him thirty-five years earlier. She was by nature serious and he'd always liked to tease her.

"Dying Dale?" She shivered slightly. A sunny March day was too rare a gift to spoil with talk of death, even in jest.

"Don't raise your eyebrows, it's true!"

"Go on, then."

"In the seventeenth century, more people lived in Dybergh than do so today. Sheep farmers, mostly. Then the Plague came to Dyburndale. Several people died in Dyburn down the road, but Dybergh was hit even harder. Every single family lost at least one member. Some were wiped out completely. The hamlet was never the same again."

Again Nancy could not help feeling cold. Bryan was a gentle man. He would have been hurt to think that his attempt to amuse and inform had upset her. She took refuge, as so often in the past, in gentle irony.

"I don't remember the estate agent telling us this when we were looking round."

"Can you wonder? But never mind that. It's history. We're here and my God, we're here to stay."

He beamed at the cottage they had bought. A simple stone dwelling from the outside, but with a spacious interior equipped with all mod cons. Their retirement home, far from the madding Manchester crowds they had fought through for so long.

Nancy had been reluctant to move. In the smart suburb where they lived, she had a circle of friends whom she had no wish to leave behind. It was different for Bryan; he was often away on business and complained from time to time that he'd lacked the

time to put down roots. But there had always been another deal to clinch, another train or plane to catch.

Until he'd had his warning, she could never have imagined him slowing his pace or settling down somewhere as far away from the city's bustle as this, the remotest of the Yorkshire Dales.

Of course, in the end he had prevailed. The heart attack had been minor, nothing to worry about according to the best specialist money could buy, but enough to frighten him. A few weeks later the advertising agency in which he was a director-shareholder had received an offer too good to refuse from a larger rival keen to buy up the competition. To Nancy's amazement, he'd jumped at the chance to sell.

"No one on his deathbed ever says, 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office,'" he pointed out.

She didn't care for talk of death. They were not old yet, despite the warning. Life had so much to offer and there was much she yet wanted to do. She did not feel she'd been shortchanged in her fifty-eight years—how could she, when Bryan had provided her with so many material blessings? All the same, it was inevitable that her role as homemaker, as wife and mother to two demanding children, had restricted her activities. And now that Jacqui was married and living on the south coast and Peter was working abroad for a multinational, she had an urge to spread her own wings. But that didn't mean flying to the back of beyond.

"A bungalow, perhaps," she had suggested. "Somewhere in mid-Cheshire might be nice. Not too far from a main-line railway station, so I can keep coming to town to do the shopping."

"Nonsense! A clean break, that's what we need. Shake the city dust from our feet. What could be better? After all these years, at last we'll have a chance to be together more."

He had slipped an arm round her shoulders and she had known she could not object. She was lucky, she realised, to have a husband who still cared for her despite the passage of the years. So many women she knew were less fortunate.

In choosing their new home, he had been careful to consult her. They had driven round Lakeland and North Yorkshire, investigating the possibilities. But, as it had happened, every place to which she took a fancy had some drawback or other. It might be overpriced, or too touristy, or simply somewhere Bryan described as ball-achingly dull.

Eventually, they had bought this house in Dyburndale, which Bryan had favoured from the start. He'd visited the area with his

parents during his childhood and its peacefulness had stuck in his mind. On her initial visit, Nancy had been tempted to suggest that the distinction between tranquillity and tedium was a narrow one, but she had been prudent enough to keep such heresies to herself. It was enough that Bryan liked the place. And happy memories count for a lot.

She'd imagined that the absence even of a pub in Dybergh might put him off. For her part, she regretted that the nearest shops were also a couple of miles away, in Dyburn. But Bryan was not to be deterred: Not even the need for a few renovations had dampened his enthusiasm.

"I've spent long enough behind a desk. It will be a tonic to try my hand at do-it-yourself."

Privately, Nancy preferred finely crafted home fixtures and fittings to the plucky efforts of the inexperienced, but it would do Bryan good to have something to occupy himself with. She suspected that his enthusiasm for Dybergh might not last long.

"I'll give it eighteen months," she confided in her partner at the last bridge game before the move. She had still not given up hope of that Cheshire bungalow, but Bryan would have to get Dyburndale out of his system first.

And now the removal van had gone and they were left to unpack and make a start on their new life, she had to admit that Dybergh was a lovely, if lonely, spot. The village comprised a cluster of a dozen houses, lining a road which straggled up the hillside from Dyburn, passing over animal grids and through gates which might have been designed to discourage all but the most determined visitor. Looking down, they could see acre upon acre of fields separated by dry-stone walls and at the bottom of the valley the narrow channel of the Dyert, a pretty stream dignified by the title of river.

"Delightful, isn't it?"

A tall woman in her early sixties had come out of the house on the other side of the road. She strode up to them and extended her hand.

"Cynthia Kellett. So glad to meet you."

Bryan began to introduce himself, but their neighbour cut him short with a smile.

"Oh, don't worry, I've heard all about you. Advertising, wasn't it? In Manchester? Oh yes, I know it well, my late husband worked there in insurance for many years before we retired up here."

She grasped Nancy's hand firmly. "Daunting, isn't it, when you

start afresh in a place like this after a lifetime of bustle? No need to worry, there are several ladies in just the same boat as you and me."

Ridiculously, Nancy found herself experiencing a sense of awe—apprehension, even—at Cynthia Kellett's omniscient manner. Giving a nervous smile, she asked how the local grapevine had managed to work so efficiently.

"Quite simple. My niece is the estate agent who sold this place on behalf of the executors of the late Mrs. Weir. You'll be glad to hear that she told me how sure she was Dybergh would suit you—Nancy, isn't it? And she's a first-class judge who knows all the ins and outs of our little community. She lives down in Dyburn at present, her husband runs the sub-post office and convenience store, but I think she has an eye on finding a place here when the children are off her hands."

She glanced over Bryan's shoulder and raised her voice.

"Miriam! Come and meet the new residents!"

Another woman, a few years younger than Nancy, had parked a Range Rover outside Cynthia Kellett's house. Nancy had the impression that she had done so out of a wish to lose no time in appraising the people who had bought Inglenook Cottage. Certainly she did not think twice before hurrying to join them.

"This is Miriam Hartley. Miriam, meet Nancy and Bryan Lillis. Miriam has the old farmhouse up at the top, where the road peters out into a track. Marvellous place, we ladies meet there every Sunday to play bridge. There are seven of us, all told; we've been one player short ever since poor Dorothy Weir passed away."

"Was that sudden?" asked Nancy. She could not quite brush away the silly idea of this place being called Dying Dale.

"Bless you, no. Dear Dorothy was ninety-two, although she kept all her faculties right up to the end. Her heart simply gave out; she died in her sleep. Though I would not have expected anything from Dorothy other than a sensible exit. She was a remarkable woman, a widow for nigh on thirty years, an inspiration to us all. Dybergh would not be the haven it is today without her efforts to secure its character. We all owe her a great deal, don't we, Miriam?"

Nancy felt a pang of unease at the prospect of having to replace such a paragon. And she was conscious, too, that Miriam Hartley was studying both of them, and perhaps especially Bryan, with an interest she did not trouble to disguise. The nosiness of an old crone would be an irritant, no more, but Miriam was no crone. On

the contrary, she had thick and glossy auburn hair—owing more to art than nature, thought Nancy with uncharacteristic malice—and a slender figure which was fitted to perfection by a canary-coloured trouser suit of conspicuously expensive cut.

"So you're the advertising man?" she said to Bryan.

"Guilty," he said with a disarming grin.

"You're not going to try selling us anything, I hope?"

"I've put all that in the past, I promise."

"Good." Her tone was decisive. "We have everything here we need, isn't that right, Cynthia?"

Cynthia Kellett nodded. "We may seem isolated. Indeed, in some respects we are. But the sense of togetherness here is quite remarkable, you'll find, Nancy. In fact, a number of our friends will be coming over to my house at nine this evening for coffee. Why don't you join us?"

Nancy made diplomatic noises about unpacking, but Cynthia waved them away.

"That's agreed, then. Splendid. Oh, I'm sorry, Bryan—if I may call you that? I should have included you in the invitation. I'm afraid I can't offer you any masculine company, or talk about rugby or politics, but please do feel free to join us nevertheless."

"I forgot to mention," said Miriam. "I won't be able to come tonight. I'm expecting a telephone call from Jeremy tonight." She turned to Nancy and explained that her eldest son was travelling the world during his year off before university and had now, she hoped, reached Cairo after a difficult trip through Africa.

"Thanks for the suggestion," Bryan said to Cynthia, "but there's a good deal of work for me to be getting on with. No reason why Nancy shouldn't have a break, but I'm sure you will be better off without me."

Cynthia Kellett gave him a pleasant smile of understanding. "As you wish. And now, I suppose, Miriam, we had better get out of Nancy and Bryan's hair and let them carry on with their unloading."

Miriam Hartley wished them goodbye and followed Cynthia into the house opposite. Nancy had the vaguest idea that, as she turned, Miriam cast Bryan another thoughtful glance. Sternly, Nancy told herself not to be foolish.

Squeezing the quart of their Mancunian belongings into the pint pot of Inglenook Cottage consumed her attention, as well as a good deal of her energy, for the next few hours. She was surprised

how glad she was to have the opportunity to take a break in the evening by calling on Cynthia.

Surprised, too, by how pleasant that break proved to be. The other women ranged in age from early fifties to late seventies, but all were obviously on excellent terms with each other. Nancy recalled the tensions and jealousies which existed in even the most agreeable of the social groups of which she had been a member in the past and found herself impressed, almost grudgingly, by the sense of goodwill towards her which everyone seemed quite sincerely to convey.

She couldn't help asking about Miriam.

"She seems charming," she said with care to the amiably overweight Audrey Bentham. "Attractive, of course, and such glamorous clothes."

"Miriam's a delightful person," Audrey agreed. "And quite a stunner in her day, of course. She lost her husband not long after they moved here, but she was very brave and threw herself into all our activities. Bags of personality, and not without a penny or two, as you may have gathered. She knows what she wants out of life and she usually gets it. But there's no side to her, she's very much one of us."

Somehow Nancy did not find this encomium quite as reassuring as Audrey Bentham might have supposed. She felt she needed to press further. "A marvellous figure," she agreed. "I'm filled with envy. Does she—does she have any men friends, do you know?"

"Miriam? Oh no, I'm afraid men are in short supply here, unless you count Albert Scanlan. He's the chap you may have seen pottering about down the road. The Scanlans have lived in the village for generations, but he's the last of the line. A bit crusty, you know, but a good odd-job man and keeps himself to himself. Very handy to have someone like that around."

Nancy did not count Albert Scanlan, and her disquiet about Miriam Hartley took the shine off what was otherwise as enjoyable an evening as she had spent in years. When she arrived back home, she found Bryan ensconced in his armchair in front of the television, sipping a glass of whisky.

"Good time?" he enquired.

"Yes, thanks. What are these?"

Bryan craned his neck to look at the table to which Nancy was pointing.

"They look like coffee cups to me, love."

"Two cups? Have we had a visitor?"

"Oh yes, I was just about to tell you. Matter of fact, what's-her-name, Mrs. Hartley, called."

"I thought she was staying in to wait for a phone call."

"Yes, she'd just heard from her son. Then it struck her that on our first night here we might be short of fresh milk. So she popped over to offer us a bottle. I offered her a coffee, of course, important to be sociable, but she didn't stop long."

"I see."

And Nancy thought she did. She resolved to keep a close eye on Mrs. Miriam Hartley.

Yet during the course of the next three or four weeks, she had little or no reason to feel further concern. Bryan worked busily on a series of improvements to their home, while she took advantage of a spell of clement spring weather to tidy the garden, as well as making the most of several opportunities to become involved in the life of the village.

And a very good life it was. Most of her neighbours had spent a long time in much the same way as herself, looking after a hard-working husband and coping with young children. They all had a good deal in common, even people like Glenda Wenningby and Beth Stamp, who were locals and lived in the smallest and least sophisticated of Dybergh's dwellings. Between them, Glenda and Beth helped out the others with the cleaning, yet there was no sense whatever of a social divide and, on the car trips to Lancaster and Skipton which Cynthia organised from time to time, they all chatted as equals, admiring window displays of clothes in the shops and feeling sorry for all those people who lived in traffic-burdened towns so much busier and noisier than their own peaceful oasis. Miriam was a lively participant in these events, and Nancy found herself grudgingly acknowledging that there was some truth in Audrey Bentham's words of admiration. Miriam even shared with Nancy and Cynthia a love for the theatre, and on one fine April night they travelled as far as Manchester to see a performance of *An Inspector Calls*, treating themselves to a thoroughly pleasant overnight stay in one of the better central hotels so as to avoid the need for a long return journey in the dark.

Nancy had almost forgotten about the name of the Dying Dale when Bryan had another warning.

It happened one Sunday. He had been digging in the garden and when he came in for a restorative cup of tea in late afternoon, he complained of tiredness.

"Are you all right? Your face is so grey."

"Tell you the truth, love, I'm not sure. In fact, my chest doesn't feel right. It's as though there's a band strapped across it."

Nancy trembled, but tried to keep her voice calm. "Is it the same feeling as—as last time?"

"Do you know—I think it might be."

She summoned the doctor at once. Their local GP was a no-nonsense woman of forty-five called Anna Rothwell who lived in Dyburn. She had no hesitation in calling for an ambulance to take Bryan along the winding country lanes to hospital. Afraid to contemplate what might happen, Nancy chewed at the smooth edges of her fingernails and waited outside his ward for news. Eventually a nurse came to offer reassurance. It was going to be all right. Bryan had, she confirmed, simply had another warning.

When he was allowed back home, Anna Rothwell came to see them again. She lectured him about the perils of overexertion and he meekly promised that he had learned his lesson. He was not as young as he had been.

The doctor took Nancy on one side. "It's been a nasty experience for both of you, I realise. But you should understand that, with any luck, Bryan will keep going for many years yet. Naturally, he may be a little more limited. Keep an eye on this breathlessness he mentioned and don't let him walk too far. But I don't see any reason for him to become an invalid. It's simply a question of recognising his limitations."

Nancy had felt sick with relief when she had learned her husband was not going to die. Since then she'd had to restrain herself from mollicoddling him, for Bryan was apt to become irritable when she fussed. But something in Anna Rothwell's tone chilled her. She sensed the doctor was trying to break news gently. Their future would be strictly circumscribed.

As if reading her thoughts, Anna Rothwell said kindly, "Don't look so glum. There are plenty of possibilities for you to lead an interesting life, even in a place as small as Dybergh. Perhaps especially in a place like Dybergh, with people as marvellous as Cynthia around."

"She's one of your patients as well, I suppose?"

"And a very good friend. She's often urging me to make my own home up here. I must admit—sometimes I'm tempted. I envy the lifestyle here, the close circle of companionship. But I won't be moving yet awhile, I think. Perhaps in another few years."

Afterwards, Nancy came to the conclusion that Anna Rothwell had been right. Although Bryan needed to take things easy, she

spent more and more time with the other women in the village. There always seemed to be something going on. An embroidery competition held by the Women's Institute in Dyburn to raise money for charity, a jumble sale, a trip to the less-frequented northern lakes. As things turned out, Bryan tended to stay at home while she gallivanted. He did not begrudge her freedom. On the contrary, he said more than once how happy he was that she had taken to life in the Dales.

There was only one of the Dybergh ladies whom Nancy continued to regard with a degree of caution. Miriam Hartley had reacted generously as soon as she'd heard of Bryan's warning. She was an excellent cook—many years ago, before marrying a prosperous actuary, she had taught domestic science at a school in Leeds—and she often insisted on bringing round cakes or scones she had made. Nancy always made her welcome, but the enthusiasm with which her husband greeted these visits never failed to disturb her. And Miriam had a habit of flattering Bryan subtly, comparing his successes in the world of commerce with her own limited achievements as a homemaker. By implication, she seemed to bracket herself with Nancy as a little woman, subservient to the male and content to be so.

Nancy had no time for feminism, which she equated with left-wing politics and thus with the kind of policies on income tax which seemed specially tailored to hurt the comfortably-off, such as Bryan and herself. Yet she resented the thought that she was in some way inferior to her husband because she had not gone out and made money. Her priorities had been different, but the more she thought about them, the more she regarded them as being at least as important. Once or twice she almost succumbed to the urge to say as much to Miriam and to point out that while Bryan was far from active these days, she still felt in the prime of life. Anna Rothwell had been right, thought Nancy. Just because he isn't fully fit, that doesn't mean I should consider myself debarred from having fun.

Was it unfair to suspect that, in her different way, Miriam too was having fun—by making up to Bryan? Nancy could see through the false modesty; she could see it was a mistake to underestimate Miriam Hartley. Yet she told herself that the woman surely meant no harm. Indeed, from time to time she did Nancy little kindnesses which were all the more considerate because they were unexpected and unsolicited.

"We all pull together in this village," Miriam said when Nancy

thanked her for one of those friendly gestures. Nancy had mentioned to Cynthia that morning that she had woken up with a strained neck and half an hour later Miriam was knocking at her door, pointing out that the warmth of the June sun made it necessary to water the begonias and busy Lizzies Nancy had recently planted out.

"I've brought my own watering can, to show I mean business. Can't have you making that strain any worse, and Bryan still needs to take things easy."

Even on such occasions, though, when she felt genuine gratitude towards Miriam, she could not help wondering if there were an ulterior motive. That sneaking thought made her feel ashamed of herself, but it persisted.

For Bryan was still an attractive man. True, he was not as strong as in the past, but Nancy knew his smile could still melt the knees of an impressionable woman. His easy manner was equally appealing; one had to live with him to be aware of the moments of tetchiness and self-interest which made him all too human.

He could be weak, too. Once, in conversation, Cynthia had mentioned Audrey's late husband with a sad shake of the head.

"Pleasant enough, my dear, but he did have a roving eye. Not that he did much about it in his later years, naturally, but one always had that uncomfortable sensation in his presence that one was being—well, *measured up*." She laughed. "And found wanting, I suspect. Ah well, he was not a bad man in his way, I suppose. It did take Audrey a little while to recover from the blow of his death, although now, as you know, she's as right as rain and can think back to the happy times they shared together. Any past infidelities are forgotten."

Patting her on the hand, Cynthia said, "You are luckier than you realise, my dear. Few men in my experience are as faithful as your Bryan."

Nancy said nothing. She felt herself colouring and, perhaps in vain, hoped that Cynthia would not notice. The remark had roused from their slumber painful memories of Janine Spencer.

Janine had been Bryan's personal assistant for three or four years more than a decade ago. The high-pressured nature of the advertising world made late-night working the norm and Nancy had taken little notice when her husband had needed to spend more time than ever at the office. A big biscuit contract, a presentation to a multinational, a series of television commercials about furniture polish, all his explanations had seemed to her plausible.

If anything, he was more attentive to her than ever in the brief times he had at home. He started bringing her flowers and taking her out for meals at expensive restaurants more regularly than before. Admittedly, he was less inclined to ardour in the marital bed, but Nancy put that down to exhaustion, and since her own appetites were modest, the lack of physical relations—as she termed it in her own mind—did not unduly trouble her.

The truth came out, as it so often does in such cases, by the merest chance. Picking up the bedroom telephone extension when a call came through one Saturday with Bryan working in his study, Nancy overheard part of a conversation which made everything clear before she slammed down the phone and threw herself onto the divan, sobbing without control. She wept for a week, and at the breakfast and dinner table she confined herself to muttered monosyllables. Bryan must have realised at once that she knew, yet she felt unable to confront him directly with his treachery. Something within her always shirked the harshest realities.

Before long he mentioned, in the most casual way, that his P.A. had resigned. Someone in London had made her an offer she could not refuse. Nancy wished Janine had possessed the self-discipline at least to turn down whatever offer Bryan had made, but she understood the message she was intended to receive. Bryan was sorry, as husbands usually are. She could believe he had not meant to cause her suffering. Janine may even have been the predator, with Bryan simply lacking the strength to resist. Inch by inch, Nancy's relationship with Bryan began to creep back towards normality.

Six months later, while Bryan was away in Milan, something occurred which somehow set a seal on the whole sorry business. A young man named Gregory called round at their smart detached home. He was out of work and trying to make a go of offering his services as a gardener. Nancy took pity on his fresh-faced enthusiasm and let him cut the thick holly hedge. Afterwards she offered him tea in the kitchen and they talked for a while. He had recently split up with his girlfriend and when he spoke of her, his eyes misted. She took pity on him and held his hand. It did not seem wrong to take him to her bed.

There was never any prospect of a repetition, she made that clear. In her own mind she thought of herself not so much as having gained revenge on Bryan for his own indiscretion, but rather as having helped a fellow human being to cope with a bad time. There was nothing more to it than that. Whenever in later years

she recalled that pleasant interlude on her own crisp sheets—and she could not help herself thinking of it every now and then—she told herself it had simply been an act of kindness.

If Cynthia had any inkling of Nancy's reservations about Bryan's fidelity, she gave no sign of it—except, just possibly, in the way she seized every opportunity to sing Miriam's praises.

"I admire her very much," she once said. "An extraordinarily courageous woman. So many people in life recognise what must be done—yet how few actually have the guts to do it?"

Nancy did not enquire about the ways in which Miriam might have demonstrated her valour—or, as she had begun to think of it, her ruthless determination. She felt frustrated that even Cynthia, a woman of discernment whose opinion she had come to value and respect, should have fallen under Miriam's spell as much as Audrey—and, even worse, Bryan.

Her husband alarmed her one summer evening. They were lying on the loungers in the back garden, watching the sun as it sank in the west. Miriam had just left. She'd come bearing gifts, two fat bags of the first of her crop of this year's tomatoes.

"Fine woman, that, you know," he remarked. "Heart of gold. I reckon she's the one decent friend we've made since we came here."

"What do you mean?" Nancy was astonished. "We have lots of friends. There's Audrey, there's Cynthia . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know you have your own little group. But frankly, love, I do find it rather dull sometimes when you're out with the girls and I'm stuck here with the telly. There's not another fellow worth talking to in the village, let alone the chance of a jar or two at the local."

Since his second warning, he had hardly driven their car and they had only visited the pub in Dyburn once. Nancy always seemed to have so many other things to do.

"There's Albert Scanlan. You can have a natter to him anytime."

Bryan's face indicated what he thought of Albert Scanlan. "That old idiot? He obviously doesn't think I have any right to have come here in the first place. And he can be damned rude too. The other day we were passing the time of day. I may have made my thoughts about Dybergh rather undiplomatically clear. He gave me that stupid gap-toothed grin of his and said he reckoned I'd soon be off anyway. The devil of it is, I think he may be proved right."

Nancy was aghast. "I don't understand. I thought you loved it here."

"So did I, but that was before I came. To be perfectly honest, I reckon we ought to up sticks right now and move back somewhere nearer to civilization."

"We can't do that! I've put so much effort into building a new life here. And I like it. I really like it!"

As she uttered the words, she realised their truth. In a short time she had in every sense made herself at home in Dybergh. The Cheshire bungalow seemed now like the fantasy lovers she had had as a schoolgirl: quite inappropriate and hopelessly unappealing when considered in the cold light of day.

The vehemence of her reaction took Bryan aback. He patted her hand and assumed a conciliatory tone.

"Well, there's no reason to make any hasty decisions. I'll give it some more thought and perhaps we'll talk about it again."

The subject was dropped, but for the rest of the evening Nancy felt a sense of misery. She knew Bryan of old. He would let ideas churn in his mind for a long time before giving tongue to them. For him to have spoken so bluntly must mean that he had already made his decision. Sooner or later they would be leaving the village.

Next morning she found herself confiding in Cynthia. As ever, her friend was not only sympathetic but practical.

"I suppose I can see his point of view," she conceded. "Albert Scanlan is hardly an ideal companion for someone as intelligent as Bryan. Albert is an old fool, of course. Fancy him trying to discourage your husband from making an effort to blend in with the community. I shall have a sharp word with him. It's really not fair, when it's bound to be hard for a man like Bryan to adjust to a different way of life. It's inevitable that for a successful businessman who has been used to being the center of attention, Dybergh must come as something of a blow to the self-esteem."

"Miriam gives him plenty of attention," said Nancy. Her own unvarnished bitterness startled her, but in her present mood she did not care. Cynthia was a decent woman and absolutely trustworthy: There was no need to present a false front to her.

"Now, dear, you mustn't take Miriam amiss. She is still a thoroughly attractive woman, I'll grant you, and vivacious as well. I wish I had her energy and drive. But believe me, her heart is in the right place. What concerns me, if you like, is that you ought also to be in your right place. And I'm absolutely sure that is here with us, in Dybergh."

Nancy shed a tear. "I feel so at home in the village. And now it looks as if it is all going to come to an end."

"I'm sure something will be worked out. But let's not upset ourselves without too much cause. How are you fixed for cheese and wine here this evening?"

The conversation switched to happier topics and an hour later Nancy left, feeling as invigorated as she always did after spending any time with Cynthia.

Shortly before lunch Miriam popped round unexpectedly. She was wearing jeans and her lovely hair was wrapped in a scarf. Even in gardening clothes she somehow contrived to give an impression of elegance. Yet something about her made Nancy feel uneasy. Had she not told herself it was absurd, she would not only have felt intimidated by the woman, but also frightened by her.

Bryan, of course, brightened as soon as she walked through the door. "Don't apologise, please. Always good to see you. How's the work going?"

Miriam had recently embarked on a thorough overhaul of the farmhouse. No new building, she had explained, just an attempt to smarten the place up. Albert Scanlan had been recruited to lend a hand and she'd been tidying the garden.

"Slowly, but I'm making progress. I just wondered—do you have a ladder I can borrow?"

"Why yes, of course. Don't you remember I did a little pointing just before I had that spot of bother with my heart?"

"Oh, that's right, it had quite slipped my mind. How providential!"

Miriam averted her eyes as she spoke and in that instant Nancy knew that she was not telling the truth.

"What do you need it for, may I ask?"

"Quite a small job, Bryan. The gutters need unblocking and I want to have a crack at them once I get the afternoon's chores out of the way."

"Is Albert clearing them for you?"

"As a matter of fact, he isn't. He's had a couple of dizzy spells lately, I understand. Nothing serious, but I don't think it would be wise to ask him to climb in the circumstances. So I thought I'd better have a go myself."

"I'll lend you a hand," Bryan said.

Miriam smiled shyly. It struck Nancy as a special talent for such a brazen woman to feign diffidence with such conviction.

"I really didn't mean to . . ."

"Of course you didn't, but I'm offering and you're accepting. Yes, yes, the matter's settled. When do you want me to come over?"

"Well—would half seven this evening be too late?"

"Not at all, not at all. We'll have finished eating by then. Nancy is going to a do at Mrs. Kellett's."

"Cheese and wine," said Nancy, controlling her emotions, with difficulty. "But surely you will be there, Miriam?"

"Actually," said Miriam, "I explained to Cynthia a few minutes ago that I would have to give it a miss. A shame, but I have so much to do at the moment."

"I see," said Nancy, and once again she was sure she did.

During lunch she responded to Bryan's attempts to chat with vague affirmative grunts. Outwardly calm, she was wrestling with a dilemma which seemed to her to be more acute than any she had had to face in the past. For his part, Bryan was nervously talkative and too clumsily solicitous for her liking.

She knew he was looking forward to his visit to Miriam's. Like a schoolboy anticipating a secret treat, he was half fearful, half excited. At last he would have the chance to start an affair with a woman he had coveted for months. And by the time the meal was over, Nancy had decided that she had no option but to let him have his fun.

It filled her with a cold anger, the prospect of sharing her husband. Yet she could see no other solution. The choice might have been proposed by the devil. But she felt an aching despair at the idea of having to leave the village and her friends. If she went away, she told herself, she would have nothing. Nothing at all. In contrast, she knew that at least she was strong enough to survive betrayal by Bryan. It had happened once in the past—perhaps more often, for all she knew. She had to confront stark truths. Bryan needed a powerful incentive to stay in Dybergh and only Miriam could supply it.

"Shall we go for a run in the car this afternoon?" he asked eagerly.

She shook her head. "I need to lie down for a little while."

"You're not sickening for something?" He could not hide the alarm in his tone, and Nancy realised that any concern for her well-being was outweighed by dismay at the prospect of being obliged to sit with her this evening instead of cleaning Miriam's gutters.

What a bloody euphemism! She couldn't help uttering a harsh bark of laughter.

"No, no, I'm not sick at all."

Except of you, she was tempted to add.

She spent most of the afternoon fully clothed on the bed. Staring sightlessly at the ceiling, she went over and over the same old ground until her head started to spin and she feared she might really be ill after all. Every time, though, the answer was the same. She now cared more for life in Dybergh than for her marriage.

They ate a light tea together. Bryan clucked about her poor appetite and kept asking if she felt all right. She bit her tongue on a hundred acid retorts and promised brusquely that she was fine. Perhaps she might have suffered a slight touch of the sun, nothing more.

"Are you going to Cynthia's, then?"

When she nodded, he could not conceal his relief. "Well, if you're sure. But I'm positive myself it's a good idea. Better by far to be up and about, get the old cogs moving. You know what my old mum used to say: 'They die in bed.'"

"Yes," she said grimly and went upstairs to change. When she came down again he kissed her and said how lovely she looked.

"I've just remembered," he said with a show of elaborate unconcern. "I did promise Miriam this morning that I'd give her a hand with clearing her gutters. A bit of a bore, but I don't like breaking my word. I don't mind doing a neighbour a small act of kindness. Any idea what sort of time you'll be back?"

"Quite late, I expect."

"No hurry, no hurry. A job like that may take me some time and I expect a woman on her own may have one or two other small tasks around the house she would welcome a hand with whilst I'm there."

"I'm sure she will," said Nancy. "Goodbye."

She walked briskly out of the front door without waiting for his customary peck on the cheek. As she crossed the road to Cynthia's, she was already starting to regret her complaisance. But it was too late now. The bridge had been crossed.

Thankfully, it did not take long for the lively companionship of Cynthia, Audrey, and the others—Anna Rothwell, the doctor, and Cynthia's niece, the estate agent, were among those there—to drag her mind away from what might be about to happen at Miriam's farmhouse. The wine tasted wonderful and when Nancy found her glass being refilled at regular intervals she did not utter her usual polite protest. Looking around at the other ladies of Dybergh, she knew she was among friends.

Later, with the little party still in full swing, Nancy and Cynthia were alone together in the kitchen. Nancy's head was

swimming, but she felt suddenly free from care.

"There's something I wanted to tell you," she said. "Bryan went round to Miriam's tonight."

Cynthia put a hand on her shoulder. "I know, Nancy, I know."

It seemed important to Nancy to seek words of comfort. "You do understand, don't you?"

"Better perhaps than you realise, my dear."

Cynthia's smile was not only calm but eternally wise. Feeling rather confused, Nancy wrinkled her brow.

"I'm not sure I . . ."

Cynthia gestured towards two chairs. "Why don't we sit down, dear? It's been a long day."

"Thank—thank you. It seems so . . ."

Cynthia pressed on Nancy's shoulder again. "You must be very brave, my love."

Tears began to fill Nancy's eyes. "It's just that . . ."

"Hush, dear. Listen to me. You have so many happy years ahead of you. With me and Audrey and all your other friends in Dybergh."

"But Bryan . . ."

"Bryan's a fine man, and in his way I don't for a minute doubt he was a good husband. And that is how you should always think of him. The time for recriminations is past. But how dreadful it would be—either in Dybergh or elsewhere—to watch him growing frailer with every passing year. You would hate it and so would he. It's so much better to have just the happy memories."

"I don't . . ."

"You see, at his age, climbing up and down ladders is bound to be dangerous. It is so very easy for accidents to occur. Miriam couldn't be blamed if something did happen."

Nancy stared at her friend. "Miriam—Miriam fancies him."

Cynthia shook her head. "Oh no. I told you before, dear. She is one of us. And so very brave and strong. I would trust her with my life. She has helped so many of us over the years. Please don't ever reproach either her or yourself. I'm sure Anna will confirm later, whatever grief you feel when the bad news comes, you must cling to this one truth—it was all for the best."

And as the sense of the words slowly sank in, bringing with them a strange contentment, a single thought came to the surface of Nancy's mind. She wasn't shutting her eyes or her heart to a wicked deed. Not at all, she could never do that. She was simply participating in an act of kindness. ●



AT THE TENT OF HOLOFERNES

by Peter Tremayne

Sister Fidelma halted her mare where the track curved round the shoulder of the hill and gazed down at the broad valley below. The placid light-blue strip of a river wound its way through the valley, among the green cultivated clan lands of the Uí Dróna. She saw the grey granite walls of the *ráth*, which was her goal, and her dust-stained features formed into a tired smile of anticipation. She had been four days on the road from the monastery of Durrow. She was tired and uncomfortable with the dust of travel. Yet it was not simply the prospect of the comforts of a bath, fresh clothes, and a rest from being on horseback that caused her to smile. It was the thought of seeing Liadin again.

Fidelma had been an only daughter with elder brothers, and Liadin, her childhood friend, had been as a sister to her. The bonding had been strong. They had reached the "age of choice" together when they had, under law, become women. At that time Fidelma had become *anamchara*, the "soul friend," to Liadin: her spiritual guide according to the practice of the faith in Ireland.

Now, in her pocket, there reposed an urgent message from Liadin which had been delivered to Fidelma at Durrow a week ago. It read: "Come at once! I am greatly troubled. Liadin." Now, as she reached her journey's end, Fidelma felt both anticipation at the reunion and apprehension.

Fidelma had not seen her friend for several years. Their paths had eventually separated, for Fidelma had gone to Tara to continue her studies while Liadin had taken the path of marriage.

Fidelma remembered Liadin's trepidation at marriage, for it had been Liadin's father, a petty chieftain of Cashel, who had agreed to an arranged marriage as a matter of political expedience. Liadin's wish had been to become a teacher. She had a good knowledge of Greek and Latin and other studies. The marriage was to a foreign chieftain. He was a Gaul named Scoriath of the Fir Morc who had been driven into exile from his own lands. Scoriath had been granted sanctuary in the clan lands of the Uí Dróna in Laigin. It was the chieftain of the Uí Dróna who had interceded with Liadin's father and persuaded him of the political and financial advantage in marrying his daughter to the Gaulish warrior. He had made Scoriath captain of his bodyguard.

At the time, Fidelma's heart had been heavy for her unfortunate soul-friend, forced into such a marriage. Their paths continued on separate courses as Fidelma pursued her studies, eventually being admitted as a *dálaigh*, an advocate, of the law courts of Ireland.

After Liadin's marriage, Fidelma had met her friend only once, and she was replete with happiness for she had, in spite of expectations, fallen in love with her husband. Fidelma had been astonished at her friend's transformation. Liadin and Scoriath's joining, so far as Fidelma could assess from her friend's enthusiasm, was that of a vine to a tree. Fidelma rejoiced in her friend's happiness and in the subsequent birth of her son. Then their paths separated again.

The child must be three years old now, Fidelma reflected, guiding her mount towards the fortress of the Uí Dróna. What could ail Liadin to make her send such a message?



Fidelma had observed that the man had been watching her approach for an hour, ever since she had rounded the shoulder of the hill and ridden carefully down into the valley towards the dark, brooding walls of the fortress. He lounged by the gate of the *ráth* with folded arms and made no attempt to change his position as she approached and halted her mount.

"What do you seek here?" he demanded gruffly.

Fidelma gazed down at him with irritation.

"Is this the *ráth* of the Uí Dróna?" she demanded.

The man motioned assertively with his head.

"Then I demand entrance."

"On what business?"

"On my own business." Her voice was soft but dangerous.

"I am Conn, Tanist of the Uí Dróna. My business is to know your business here," was the implacable response. A Tanist was the heir-elect of a chieftain.

Fidelma was unperturbed. "I am come to see Liadin. I am Fidelma of Kildare."

Fidelma was aware of a momentary change of expression on the man's face. She had a curious feeling that it was a look of relief, but it was gone before she was sure. The Tanist shifted his weight upright.

"I regret, Sister, that Liadin is being heard before the Brehon Rathend even as we speak."

Sister Fidelma's features re-formed into an expression of surprise.

"Being *heard*? Do you mean that she pleads a case in law before the Brehon?"

The Tanist hesitated. "In a way. She pleads her innocence."

"Innocence? Of what is she accused?"

"Liadin is accused of the murder of her husband, Scoriath of the Fir Morc, and of her own son."

The Brehon Rathend was tall and thin, with pale, bloodless-looking skin. The learned judge had hooded dark eyes with shadowy pouches under them which seemed to suggest that he was a man unused to sleep. The lines of his face certainly denoted that he was a man who had little sense of humour. His entire expression was one of controlled irritation. The whole measured up to an expression of ill-health and ill-humour.

"By what authority do you interrupt this trial, Sister?" he demanded querulously as he came into the chamber where

Fidelma had been conducted. Fidelma told him of her qualification as a *dálaigh*.

"Is Liadin of the Uí Dróna represented by an advocate?" she demanded.

"No," he replied. "She refuses to plead."

"Then I am here to plead her case for her. I would request a postponement of the hearing for twenty-four hours that I may consult with Liadin."

Rathend grimaced diffidently.

"This will be difficult. Besides, how do you know she will accept your advocacy?"

Fidelma glared hard at the Brehon. Rathend tried to return her gaze but eventually dropped his eyes uncomfortably.

"Even if she accepts your advocacy, everyone has already gathered to hear the opening arguments," he explained lamely.

"The purpose of the hearing is for justice to be done not for the convenience of an audience. The opening of the hearing can be delayed under law."

A slight colour tinged the sallow cheeks of the thin Brehon. He was about to reply when the door of the room burst open abruptly and a young woman entered. Fidelma quickly appraised her and had to admit that she was attractive in spite of a prominent aquiline nose, sallow skin, and dark hair which made her rather foreign in appearance. Her dark eyes flashed vivaciously. That she was a woman of rank was obvious.

"What does this delay mean, Rathend?" The dark eyes fell on Fidelma and registered suspicion. "Who is this?"

"Sister Fidelma is an advocate come to plead Liadin's case," Rathend said obsequiously.

A flush of annoyance tinged the woman's cheeks.

"Then you are late in coming here, Sister."

Fidelma let her gaze move almost languidly over the shorter woman's haughty features.

"And you are . . . ?" she asked softly, reminding Rathend of his breach of etiquette and causing the woman's flush of annoyance to intensify.

"This is Innan, chieftainess of the Uí Dróna," Rathend supplied quickly. "You stand in her *ráth*."

Fidelma let a smile deepen the corners of her mouth and she inclined her head in acknowledgment of the woman's rank rather than in deference.

"Whether I am late or early, Innan of the Uí Dróna, the point is

that I am here and justice must be served." A *dálaigh* of Fidelma's rank of *anruth* could speak on equal terms with a provincial king and could even sit in the presence of the High King himself, though only at the latter's invitation. Fidelma turned back to Rathend. "I shall need to consult with Liadin to arrange her defence. I need twenty-four hours' delay before the opening arguments."

"Defence?" Was there a bitter humour in Irnan's interruption. "What defence can there be for this woman?"

Fidelma barely glanced at her.

"I shall be able to inform the court of my defence once I have had access to Liadin."

"The case is clear," Irnan snapped. "Liadin killed her husband and her son."

"For what reason?" demanded Fidelma.

"It was an arranged marriage. Perhaps Liadin hated Scoriath?" the chieftainess sniffed. "Who knows?"

"A weak reason when she could have sought the redress of law. And why kill the child? What mother would kill her own child? Why, indeed, kill after three and a half years of marriage if, as you say, it was in pique at an arranged marriage?"

Irnan's eyes flashed with uncontrolled anger. Her tone told Fidelma that here was a woman used to being firmly in control of a situation and obeyed without question. Opposition was something that Irnan was clearly unused to.

"I am not on trial here, Sister. I cannot answer your questions."

"Someone will have to answer them," replied Fidelma calmly. She turned to the Brehon again. "To that end, will you grant the postponement?"

Rathend seemed to glance at Irnan before responding. Fidelma saw, from the corner of her eye, the chieftainess shrug. Rathend sighed and inclined his head in affirmative.

"Very well, Sister. You have twenty-four hours before the court sits to hear the charges. Be warned that the charge is that of *fin-gal*, kin-slaying, and is so grave in this instance that we are not talking of compensation in terms of an *eric* fine. If Liadin is judged guilty, so heinous is this crime that she will be cast adrift on the high seas in an open boat without oars, sail, food, or water. And if she survives, if she is cast ashore by the will of God, on whosoever's shore she lands, that person has the right of life and death over her. That is the judgment prescribed by law."

Sister Fidelma knew well the penalty for extreme cases of murder.

"Only if she is found guilty," she added softly.

Irnan let out a sharp bray of laughter.

"There is little doubt of that."

She turned and swept from the room, leaving Rathend gazing in unhappy confusion after her.

The two women broke apart from their embrace. Fidelma's eyes were troubled as she gazed at the face of her friend. Liadin was shorter than Fidelma, with a shock of chestnut hair, pale skin, and dark brown eyes that seemed almost black from a distance. Her face was strained, the flesh under the eyes was dark with worry, the skin almost bloodless and etched with lines.

"Fidelma! Praise the saints that you have come at last. I had given you up. I did not kill Scoriath, nor my son Cunobel."

"No need to convince me," Fidelma replied quickly. "I have succeeded in getting a postponement of your trial for twenty-four hours. You must now tell me everything so that I will know best how to defend you."

Liadin let out a small sob.

"My mind has not worked since I heard the terrible news of Scoriath's death. I have been numbed with shock and could not believe that I was being accused. Somehow I thought I would awake from all this . . . that . . ."

Fidelma squeezed her friend's hand as her voice trailed off.

"I will do your thinking for you. Simply tell me the facts as you know them."

Liadin wiped her tears and forced a smile.

"I feel such hope now. But I know so little."

"When we last met, you told me you were very happy with Scoriath. Had anything changed since then?"

Liadin shook her head vehemently. "We were blest with contentment and a fine child."

"Was Scoriath still commander of the bodyguard of the chieftainness of the Uí Dróna?"

"Yes. Even when Irnan succeeded her father Drón as chieftainness of the clan a month ago, Scoriath continued as her commander. But he was considering giving up war and simply working his own land."

Fidelma pursed her lips. She could not help but recall the hostility which Irnan had displayed towards Liadin.

"Was there any conflict of personality? What of the Tanist? Was there enmity with the heir-elect?"

"Conn? No, there was no animosity between Scoriath and Conn."

"Very well. So let us turn to the facts of the death of Scoriath and your son." Time enough to commiserate with her friend later.

"It happened a week ago. I was not here at the time."

"Explain. If you were not here, on what grounds are you accused of carrying out the deed? Start at the beginning."

Liadin made a little gesture of helplessness.

"On the day it happened I had left Scoriath and the child here and had ridden to visit a sick relative, my aunt Flidais. The illness was minor and when I reached her dwelling I found her past any danger and almost entirely well. It had been nothing but a slight chill. So I returned here, reaching the fortress in the late evening, about an hour after sunset. As I made my way to our chambers, Conn came out of our apartments and seized me."

"Seized you? Why?"

"It is all so hazy now. He was shouting that Scoriath was slain along with my son. I could not believe it. He seemed to be accusing me."

"For what reason?"

"He had found a bloodstained knife and clothing, my clothes, hidden in my private chamber. Scoriath and my son had been found in our chambers—stabbed to death."

"You immediately denied responsibility?"

Liadin nodded fiercely.

"How could anyone think a mother could slaughter her own child?"

Fidelda pursed her lips and shrugged.

"Alas, it has been known, Liadin. We have to look at things as logically as we can. Did they have any other grounds to accuse you?"

Liadin hesitated a moment.

"There came another witness against me. A house servant, Branar, came forward and said she had witnessed Scoriath and me in argument that very day."

"Witnessed? And had she?"

"Of course not. I had not seen Branar that day."

"So she lied? How could she claim to have seen this argument then?"

"She said that she had *heard* it," corrected Liadin after a moment's thought. "She said that she was passing our bed chamber door and she heard our voices raised in angry exchanges. She then thought it prudent to depart. I denied it but no one would believe me."

"Who brought you the news of your aunt's illness?"

"A monk from the monastery of the Blessed Moling, which is not far from here. A Brother named Suathar."

"And who saw you leave the *ráth* to visit your aunt?"

"Many people. It was midday when I left."

"So it was well known that you had left the *ráth* to visit your aunt?"

"I suppose so."

"And who saw you arrive back that night?"

"Conn, of course, when he seized me."

Fidelma frowned slightly.

"He saw you arrive through the gate, you mean? And then seized you later?"

Liadin shook her head in bewilderment.

"No. I meant that he saw me at the time he seized me at the door of my chambers."

"So no one saw you actually arrive back? So far as people were concerned, you could have come back much earlier that evening. You travelled on horse. How about the stable boys?"

Liadin looked worried.

"Ah, I see what you mean. No one was about in the stable at the time. I unsaddled my own horse. I am afraid that no one saw me arrive back."

"But your aunt will witness the time that you left her?"

"My aunt has come here already to testify but Rathend says this matters little. No one disputes that I went to see my aunt, nor that I returned that evening. They say, however, that I could have arrived back earlier, that I went straight to Scoriath, slew him, and then my child, and was going to sneak back out into the night to feign a later arrival, hoping that the bodies would have been found before my return."

Fidelma chewed her lower lip in thought.

"It seems, indeed, that Branar is then central to the argument of your guilt, for she presents us with a motive: the motive being that your relationship with Scoriath was not what you claimed it to be. If the quarrel was not between Scoriath and yourself then either Branar is mistaken or lying. Was Scoriath seen by anyone after this alleged quarrel?"

"Of course," Liadin said at once. "Cunobel was with Branar all afternoon while Scoriath was attending Irnan at the assembly of the clan and while I was away from the *ráth*. The assembly rose at sunset. But what of the knife and bloodied clothes in my chamber?"

"Anyone can plant such evidence. And there is an obvious contradiction there. You would hardly leave such evidence in your chamber and be sneaking back out into the night to gain an alibi, would you?"

Liadin paused to reflect on the logic and then she nodded with a faint smile.

"I hadn't thought of that."

Fidelma gave her an encouraging grin.

"You see? Already we find a lack of logic in the arguments against you. The case against you seems so circumstantial. Has anyone put forward an argument as to why you should want to slay your own husband and your child? Have they ascribed a motive, a reason why you argued with Scoriath and why you would have killed him and your son?"

"Rathend believes I did it in some uncontrolled fit of jealousy."

Fidelma looked hard at her friend.

"And did you have reason for jealousy?" she asked softly.

Liadin raised her chin defiantly, a hot colour on her cheeks.

"With Scoriath? Never!"

"So did he have enemies? As commander of the bodyguard, and as a foreigner in this land, he was surely bound to have created animosities. But was there anyone in particular that you know of?"

Liadin was frowning reflectively.

"None that I can name. But Scoriath became morose a few weeks ago and would not tell me what ailed him. All that Scoriath said was something I found very strange. We were talking about his giving up command of Irnan's bodyguard. As I said, he had decided to give up the profession of warfare and farm his own land. But he was brooding and depressed. As we were talking, he suddenly said, 'I will become a farmer unless the Jewess has plans to destroy our peace.'"

Fidelma's eyes widened.

"The Jewess? Who did he mean?"

Liadin shrugged.

"I have no idea. I know of no Jewess in the kingdom."

"You asked him to explain, of course?"

"I did, but he laughed it away and said it was nothing but a bad joke."

"Can you repeat exactly what he said, and the manner in which he said it?"

Liadin did so. It did not make matters clearer.

Sister Fidelma rose to her feet, her brows drawn together. Then

she focussed on her friend's worried features and smiled to reassure her.

"There is a mystery here, Liadin. Something curious that itches my mind like a bug bite I cannot yet scratch. I must investigate further. Do not worry. All will be well."

Conn, the Tanist of the Uí Dróna, stood awkwardly in front of Sister Fidelma, occasionally shifting his weight from one leg to another, trying to maintain an expressionless countenance. He was a fair-haired and handsome man.

Seated to one side was the Brehon Rathend, who, as the law ordained, had to attend any questioning of witnesses, excepting the questioning of the accused person, before the trial. His job was to observe and not to question nor even participate unless the *dálaigh* did not abide by the rules set forth for pretrial interrogations.

"Tell me about the events which led to your arresting Liadin."

The young warrior cleared his throat and spoke woodenly, as if having learnt a lesson by rote.

"I found the weapon that killed Scoriath in the bed chamber of . . ."

"From the beginning," Fidelma interrupted with annoyance. "When did you last see Scoriath? See him alive, that is?"

Conn considered for a moment.

"On the evening of the day on which he was killed. It was the day of the clan assembly, the feast day of the blessed Mochta, the disciple of Patrick. That afternoon Scoriath, myself, and some other warriors were in attendance to our chieftainess, Irnan, at the assembly hall. An hour before sunset, the assembly dispersed so that each could return home before the hour of darkness."

"Was that the last time you saw Scoriath alive?"

"It was, Sister. Everyone returned to their homes. Later Irnan's messenger came to me and said that he was looking for Scoriath, for Scoriath had been summoned by the chieftainess. The messenger said that he had gone to his chambers but could find no one." The fair-haired young man paused and frowned, massaging his forehead with his fingers as if the act would conjure memory. "I knew this to be strange, for Scoriath had a child, and if he were not in his house then his wife and child or servant would be there."

He paused as if seeking approval from Fidelma. She simply motioned him to continue.

"I went to the house with the messenger. No one answered in response to our knocking. I opened the door and went in. I cannot describe it, I felt something was wrong. A small oil lamp, whose

light I could see through a crack in the door, burnt in the bed chamber. I went to the door and pushed it open." He genuflected hastily. "There I found Scoriath face downward on the floor. Blood still gushed from a terrible wound in his neck . . ."

"Still gushed?" Fidelma interrupted quickly.

Conn nodded.

"Obviously he had not long been dead. I turned the body slightly and saw that his throat had been cut. Then, by the door of a small side chamber, was the body of Scoriath's child, Cunobel. He, too, was dead from several wounds in the chest. Blood stained the entire room."

The Tanist paused to swallow nervously.

"I saw that the side chamber door, a chamber where the child slept, and which Scoriath's wife used for her personal toilet, stood ajar. I noticed a trail of blood leading into the chamber. I followed this trail of droplets and it led me to a chest. Inside the chest was a knife, still sticky with blood, and a bloodstained outer garment which belonged to Liadin."

He was silent for so long that Fidelma felt she had to prompt him.

"And then?"

"I sent the messenger back to Irnan to tell her what had been discovered. There was no doubt in my mind that Liadin was answerable for this foul deed."

"Why?"

The fair-haired man blinked.

"Why?" he repeated as if surprised at the question being asked.

"Because, Sister, I found the knife and the garment. They were hidden in a chest in Liadin's room. The garment belonged to Liadin. I had often seen her wearing it."

"'Hidden' is hardly an exact description, Conn," Fidelma observed. "A trail of blood led you to the chest."

He shrugged. "The bloodstains probably went unnoticed in Liadin's panic to hide the objects of her guilt."

"Perhaps. But that is supposition. If you had done this deed, would you have gone into your personal chamber to hide the weapon and bloodstained garment? Even without the bloody trail, someone would surely be bound to examine that room later?"

Conn looked confused.

"Perhaps you are right, Sister. But surely no one else could have done the deed, and that for a very good reason."

Fidelma raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"What is that reason?"

"Scoriath was a warrior. A man of strength as well as full of a warrior's guile. Yet he turned his back on his murderer, allowed them to reach around his neck and slit his throat. The incision was made in the left side of the neck and the blade drawn along the throat to the right side. No one could have been placed in such a position to perform the deed unless Scoriath trusted them very well. Only a woman with whom Scoriath was intimate could be so trusted."

For a few minutes Fidelma sat considering.

"Could the wound not have been made by a left-handed person, facing Scoriath?" mused Fidelma.

Conn blinked again. It was obviously a habit which signaled reflection on a question.

"But Liadin is right-handed."

"Just so," Fidelma remarked softly.

"And," Conn continued, ignoring her point, "if the murderer stood in front of Scoriath, he surely would have defended himself from the attack with ease."

Fidelma mentally conceded the point.

"Continue, Conn. You say that you sent the messenger back to Innan. What then?"

"I was surveying the scene when I heard a noise outside the building. I moved to the door, wrenched it open, and found Liadin attempting to sneak back into the building, presumably in an attempt to retrieve the knife and garment from her chamber."

"That is surmise on your part," Fidelma admonished.

Conn shrugged indifferently.

"Very well. I found Liadin outside the door and I arrested her. Innan came soon afterwards with Rathend, the Brehon. Liadin was taken away. That is all I know."

"Did you know Scoriath well?"

"Not well, save that he was captain of the guard."

"Were you jealous of him?"

Conn appeared bewildered by the abrupt question.

"Jealous?"

"Scoriath was a foreigner," Fidelma explained. "A Gaul. Yet he had achieved high office among the Uí Dróna. Did it not annoy you to see a foreigner so well treated?"

"He was a good man, an excellent champion. It is not my place to question the decisions reached by the councils of the king nor those of my chief. He was a good warrior. As for high office . . . I

am the heir-elect to the chieftainship, so why should I be jealous of him?"

"And what was your relationship with Liadin?"

Did a faint colour suffuse his cheeks?

"I have no relationship," he said gruffly. "She was Scoriath's wife."

"A good wife, to your knowledge?"

"I suppose so."

"A good mother?"

"I have no knowledge of such things. I am unmarried."

"If she had murdered Scoriath as you suggest, do you not question the fact that she also murdered her own child . . . a three-year-old boy?"

Conn was stubborn.

"I can only state what I know."

"Did Scoriath ever say anything about a Jewess to you?"

Conn was again apparently bewildered by this abrupt change of tack.

"Never. I have never heard of a woman of that religion in these parts, though it is said that many Jewish traders frequent the port of Síl Mailuidir on our southern coast. Irnan spent some of her youth there and may have an answer for you about such things."

The servant, Branar, was a raw-boned, fresh-faced girl with wide, guileless-looking blue eyes, and a permanent expression of confusion. She was no more than a year or two beyond the age of choice. Sister Fidelma smiled encouragingly at her and bade her be seated. Rathend sat in place, looking a trifle irritated. Branar had been escorted to the chamber by her mother but Fidelma had refused to allow the old woman to remain with her daughter during the interrogation, showing her to a side chamber. Rathend thought that Fidelma might have showed some compassion for the young girl and allowed the mother to remain. Branar was nervous and awed by the proceedings.

"How long have you been a servant to Liadin and Scoriath?" Fidelma opened.

"Why, not even a year, Sister." The girl bobbed her head nervously as she sat. Her confused, somewhat frightened gaze traveled from Fidelma to the stony-faced Brehon and then back to Fidelma.

"A year? Did you enjoy working for them?"

"Oh yes. They were kind to me."

"And you liked your work?" inquired Fidelma.

"Oh yes."

"And you had no problems with either Liadin or Scoriath? Were there no arguments between them and you?"

"No. I was quite happy."

"Was Liadin a caring wife and mother?"

"Oh yes."

Fidelma decided to attempt another tack.

"Do you know anything about a Jewess? Did Scoriath know such a woman?"

For the first time Rathend raised an eyebrow in surprise and glanced at Fidelma. But he kept silent.

"A Jewess? No."

"What happened on the day Scoriath was killed?"

The girl looked troubled for a moment and then her face lightened.

"You mean about the argument I heard? I went that morning to clean the house of Liadin and Scoriath as I usually did. They were in the bed chamber with the door closed, but their voices were raised in a most terrifying argument."

"What were they saying?"

"I could not make out what was being said. The door was closed."

"Yet you could clearly identify their voices and knew that they were engaged in a violent quarrel, is that it?"

"It is. I could hear only the tones of their voices raised in anger."

Fidelma gazed at the ingenuous face of the house servant.

"You only heard Liadin's voice through a closed door but can identify her voice clearly?"

The girl's nod was emphatic.

"Very well. Do you think that you know my voice by now?"

The girl hesitated suspiciously but then nodded.

"And you would know your own mother's voice?"

The girl laughed nervously at the apparent stupidity of the question.

Sister Fidelma rose abruptly.

"I am going into the other room. I will close the door and will speak at the top of my voice. I want you to see if you can hear what I say."

Rathend sighed. He clearly felt that Fidelma was pursuing too theatrical an approach.

Fidelma went into the next room and closed the door behind her. Branar's mother rose uncertainly as she entered.

"Is your questioning over, Sister?" she asked in a puzzled tone.

Fidelma smiled softly and shook her head.

"I want you to say anything that comes into your head, but say it as loud as you can. It is an experiment."

The woman stared at Sister Fidelma as if she were mad but, at a nod from Fidelma, began talking a mixture of sense and gibberish as loud as she could until Fidelma signaled her to silence. Fidelma then opened the door and called to Branar. The girl rose uncertainly.

"Well," smiled Fidelma, "what did you hear?"

"Oh, I heard you speaking loudly, Sister, but I could not understand all you said."

Fidelma smiled broadly now.

"But you did hear *my* voice?"

"Oh yes."

"Clearly my voice?"

"Oh yes."

Fidelma turned and pushed the door open. Branar's mother shuffled nervously forward, as perplexed as her daughter.

"The voice you heard was your own mother's voice, Branar. Are you still sure you wish to swear that it was Liadin who was arguing with Scoriath behind the closed door?"

The chambers where Liadin and Scoriath had dwelt were a set of rooms in the fortress not far from the stable buildings beyond the central gate. Three chambers constituted the dwelling: a living room, a bed chamber leading off it, and, with access from the bed chamber, a smaller chamber in which Liadin's young son had his bed and in which Liadin apparently stored her clothes.

The rooms now seemed cold and bleak although they were filled with items which once spelt homeliness and comfort. Perhaps it was the lack of a fire in the hearth and the gloom of the day that enhanced the chill.

Rathend led the way, crossing the floor of the room in which meals were cooked and eaten, where an iron cauldron hung on a spit over the dead grey ashes.

"Scoriath was slain in this room," Rathend explained, showing the way into the large bed chamber.

The granite blocks of the walls were covered with tapestries. There were no windows, and the room was dark. Rathend bent and lit a tallow candle. There was a large, ornately carved bed.

The bedclothes, a jumbled mess of linen and blankets, were stained with what was obviously dried blood.

"Scoriath was lying there. The child, Cunobel, was found just by the door of the smaller chamber," Rathend explained.

Fidelma noted the dark stains crossing the floor to the small arched door which led off the chamber. She saw, by the doorway, that there was a slightly larger pool of dried blood. But the stains also led beyond the chamber door.

She walked into the smaller chamber with Rathend, who held aloft the tallow candle, following her. The trail of dried blood led to a large wooden trunk as Conn had said it had. She noticed some footprints in the dried blood. They were large and must have been made by Conn during his investigation, obscuring the original footprints of the killer.

"That was the trunk in which Liadin's bloodstained garment was found together with the knife," the Brehon said. Next to the trunk was a small cot in which the boy, Cunobel, must have slept. "There are no bloodstains there so we can conclude that the child was slain where he was found."

Fidelma did not reply but returned to the main bed chamber and examined it again.

"What are you looking for, Sister?" ventured Rathend.

"I do not know . . . yet." Fidelma frowned suddenly, noticing a book satchel hanging from a peg. She reached into it and drew out a moderate-sized volume. She gazed with interest at the patterned binding, frowning slightly as she noted a few dark stains which spoil the careful artistry of the leatherwork.

Reverently, she placed it on a nearby table and motioned for Rathend to hold the candle higher.

"Why," she said softly, opening the first page, "it is a copy of the *Hexapla* of Origenes. What would Scoriath or Liadin be doing with this?"

The Brehon sighed impatiently.

"There is no law against the ownership of books."

"But it is unusual," insisted Fidelma as she turned the pages. It was a collection of Hebrew religious texts which Origenes, head of the Christian school of Alexandria, had copied three centuries before. He had rendered the text in parallel columns, in Hebrew, Greek, and then in Latin.

Fidelma suddenly frowned. Someone had marked a passage in a textual section entitled "*Apokrupto*." Fidelma dredged her knowledge of Greek. It meant "hidden texts." She read the passage with

a frown. The story was of how the Assyrian king, Nebuchadnezzar, sent his army against the Israelites. The army was commanded by an invincible general named Holofernes. As the Assyrian army lay encamped around the Israelite city of Bethulia, a young Jewish maiden named Judith went to the Assyrian camp and was brought before Holofernes. She seduced him and then, afterwards, as he lay in a drunken slumber, she cut off his head and returned to her own people, who took heart by this sign, rushed upon the invading army, and routed them.

Fidelma smiled to herself. It was a story worthy of the ancient Irish bards, for it was once believed that the soul reposed in the head and the greatest sign of respect was to sever the head of one's enemy. Fidelma's eyes suddenly widened. Judith. Her eye traveled from the Hebrew text to the Greek and then to the Latin. She caught her breath as she realised the meaning of the name Judith—it meant Jewess.

Why had the passage been marked? What had Scoriath meant when he told Liadin that he would give up his warrior's role and become a farmer unless the "Jewess" prevented him? Scoriath was a foreigner and, in a way, commander of an army as Holofernes had been. Also, Scoriath's head had nearly been severed. Was there some bizarre meaning to this?

Slowly she replaced the book under the puzzled gaze of the Brehon.

"Have you seen all you wish?"

"I wish," Fidelma replied, raising her head, "to see the genealogist of the Uí Dróna."

"You now say that you wish to question the chieftainness of the Uí Dróna? What has she to do with this matter?"

It was an hour later and Rathend and Fidelma were seated in the great hall of the fortress.

"That is for me to discover," replied Fidelma. "I have the right to call Irnan for examination. Do you deny it?"

"Very well." Rathend was clearly reluctant. "But I hope you know what you are doing, Fidelma of Kildare."

Irnan came in after a short, uneasy period of waiting. Rathend leapt to his feet as the chieftainness entered.

"Why am I summoned, Rathend?" Irnan's voice was irritable and she chose to ignore Fidelma. But it was Fidelma who replied to her.

"How long was Scoriath your lover, Irnan?"

A pin falling to the ground would have been heard for several seconds after Fidelma had spoken.

The face of the swarthy woman blanched, the lips thinned. An expression of shock etched her features.

Rathend was staring at Fidelma as if he could not believe what he had heard.

Suddenly, as if her bones and muscles would no longer support her, Irnan seemed to fold up on a nearby chair, her gaze, combining consternation and fear, not leaving Fidelma's imperturbable features. As she did not reply, Fidelma continued.

"Before your birth, I am told that your father, Drón, traveled to the port of *Sil Maíluidir*. His aim was to encourage some merchants of the clan to open trade there. While at the port he met a Phoenician merchant who had a beautiful daughter. Drón married her and they had a child. The child was yourself. Your mother was named Judith—the Jewess. She survived your birth only by a few months. When she died your father then brought you back here, where you were raised."

"That story is no secret," replied Irnan sharply. "Molua, the genealogist, doubtless told it to you."

"When did Scoriath tell you that he no longer loved you and wanted to resign his command and be a simple farmer?"

Irnan had apparently recovered her composure and chuckled drily.

"You do not know everything, *dálaigh* of the court. Scoriath did love me and told me as much on the day his wife slew him for jealousy."

Fidelma found herself having to control her surprise at the sudden candour of Irnan's response.

"Scoriath loved me, but he was a man of honour." Irnan's words were like acid. "He did not want to harm Liadin nor his young son and so he told me that he would not divorce his wife. He would stay with them."

"That provides you with a motive for killing him," Fidelma pointed out.

"I loved Scoriath. I would never have harmed him."

"So you would have us believe that you accepted the situation?"

"Scoriath and I were lovers from the first day that he arrived among us. My father, who was then chieftain, found out. While he admired Scoriath as a warrior, my father wanted me to marry an Irish prince of wealth. I think he was more determined that I should do so because of the fact that I was my mother's daughter

and he wanted to compensate for my foreign blood. He then forced Scoriath into an arranged marriage with Liadin. Scoriath did not love her."

Irnan paused and stared reflectively at the fire for a moment before drawing her dark eyes back to the graven features of Fidelma.

"When my father died, I became the Uí Dróna. I was then free to do as I willed. I urged Scoriath to divorce Liadin, making fair settlement on her and the child. He, however, was a man of honour and refused. He did not want to hurt Liadin. So we remained lovers.

"Then came the news of how Scoriath and his son were slain. It was so obvious who did it and why. Liadin must have found out and killed him in jealous passion."

Sister Fidelma gazed thoughtfully at Irnan.

"Perhaps it is too obvious a conclusion? We must take your word alone as to Scoriath's attitudes. You could just as easily have slain Scoriath because he rejected your love."

Irnan's jaw came up pugnaciously.

"I do not lie. This is all I have to say." Irnan stood up. "Have you done with your questions?"

"All for the time being."

The chieftainess turned and, without another glance at the unhappy Rathend or at Fidelma, strode from the room.

Fidelma sighed. There was something itching at the back of her memory.

Rathend was about to break the silence when the door of the hall opened and a nervous youth in the brown homespun robes of a *religieux* entered.

"Is the Brehon Rathend here?" he began nervously and then, catching sight of Fidelma, he bobbed his head nervously. "*Bene vobis*, Sister."

"I am Rathend," the Brehon said. "What do you wish?"

"I am Suathar of the monastery of the Blessed Moling. I came to seek the return of the book we loaned to Scoriath. I was told that before I can reclaim the book, I must have your permission."

Fidelma looked up swiftly.

"Scoriath borrowed the copy of Origenes's *Hexapla* from your monastery's library?"

"Yes; a week ago, Sister," agreed the young man.

"Did Scoriath request the loan of this book in person?"

Suathar shook his head, puzzled by the question.

"No. He sent a message and asked that the book be delivered

the next time someone came to the *ráth* of the Uí Dróna. I had to come here six days ago because the aunt of the lady Liadin was ill and requested me to bring her to nurse her. I gave the book to Liadin."

Rathend had handed the book satchel to the monk.

"You'd best check to see whether all is in order," Fidelma invited as the young man began his thanks.

The monk hesitated, pulled out the leather-bound book, turning it over in his hands. Then he opened it.

"Has someone made a mark on the story of Holofernes?" prompted Fidelma.

"The mark was not there when I left it," agreed the young monk. "Also . . ." he hesitated. "The dark, brownish stains on the leather binding were not there before. They look like the imprint of the palm of a hand."

Fidelma exhaled sharply, rebuking herself for her blindness. She took the book and, after a moment's examination, placed her hand palm down over the dark stain to assess the measurement of the imprint.

"I have been a fool!" she said softly, as if to herself. Then she drew herself up again. "Suathar, is the work of Origenes one that is popular?"

"Not popular. As you must know, Sister, it is only of passing interest to we of the Faith because the Hebrew texts, which the great Origenes put together, are of a questionable nature, being the stories which we now call 'The Apocrypha,' from the Greek word . . ."

Fidelma raised a hand impatiently to silence him.

"Just so. Nowhere else is the story of Judith and Holofernes to be found?"

"None that I know of, Sister."

"Has the lady Liadin ever visited your library at the monastery?"

Suathar pursed his lips in thought.

"Yes. Several weeks ago."

Fidelma turned with a grave face to the Brehon.

"I have finished my inquiries, Rathend. I need only to see Liadin once more. The case may be heard tomorrow."

"Then you will be entering a 'not guilty' plea for the lady Liadin?" asked Rathend.

Fidelma shook her head at the startled Brehon.

"No. I shall be making a plea of 'guilty.' Liadin has been clever, but not clever enough."

Before Sister Fidelma entered Liadin's small cell, she turned to Conn, the commander of the guard, whom she had asked to accompany her, and told him to remain outside the door in case he was needed.

As Liadin rose with bright expectation on her face, Fidelma positioned herself just inside the door with folded arms.

"I will defend you, Liadin," she began coldly without preamble, "but only to seek some mitigation for your guilt. It has been hard for me to believe that you would attempt to use me in this evil plot."

When the horror of realisation at what Fidelma had said began to spread across her features, Liadin opened her mouth to protest.

"I know it all," Fidelma interrupted. "You appealed to my intellectual vanity with a number of false clues which you thought would lead me to suspect Irnan. Above all, you relied on my human weakness, that of my long friendship with you, to convince me that you could never have done this deed."

Liadin's face was suddenly drained of emotion and she sat back on the cot abruptly.

"You learnt that Scoriath had never loved you," went on Fidelma relentlessly. "You learnt that he was having an affair with Irnan. The crime was well planned. If you could not have him, neither would Irnan. You hatched a cunning double plot. You decided to kill him and send for me, leaving me a false trail so that I would defend you by following that trail to Irnan."

"How could I do that?" The girl was defiant.

"You had discovered the story of Irnan's parentage and it put you in mind of the story of Holofernes. You were always a good Greek scholar and decided to use that as the intellectual bait which you knew would appeal to my imagination. You checked the story in the *Hexapla* by Origenes on a visit to the library of the monastery of Moling. When the time was right, you sent to ask Suathar, in Scoriath's name, to bring the book which would provide me with the next clue after you had dropped into your conversation with me that Scoriath was afraid of someone called the 'Jewess.'"

Fidelma paused and gazed sadly at her friend.

"You took the book and hung it in the chamber. One unexpected thing occurred. You were overheard by Branar having a row with Scoriath. But that turned out to be no problem because, having

convinced myself so firmly of your innocence, I cleverly used a trick to dismiss Branar's information to my own satisfaction. Cleverness when used with prejudice is a formidable thing.

"You went off to your aunt. Later you returned unnoticed to the *ráth* and entered your chambers. There was Scoriath. He had no cause to suspect you, and you struck him from behind. Perhaps it was then that you remembered . . . in the row that morning you had neglected to plant the main piece of evidence needed for me to follow the trail. You had neglected to mark the passage about Judith and Holofernes. You did so then, for there was blood which stained the leather binding and went unnoticed.

"Then," Fidelma went on remorselessly, "then you went to hide in the stables and wait until Conn discovered the bodies. You appeared, pretending to have just returned from your aunt. You knew that you would be accused, but you had already sent for me and laid your false trail. The thing that was irritating my mind was the fact that you must have sent for me before the murder to allow me to reach here on time."

"It is not true," Liadin's voice was broken now. "Even if I did kill Scoriath for jealousy, there is a flaw in your arguments and one I think you know in your heart."

Fidelma raised her head and returned her friend's gaze. Did she detect a triumph in that gaze?

"And what is that?" she asked softly.

"You know that I would not be capable of killing my own son. While you have that doubt you will do all you can to argue my case and clear me of this crime."

"You are right," Fidelma admitted. "I know that you could not have killed your son."

Fidelma heard a movement outside the cell but did not take her eyes from Liadin's triumphant gaze.

"Come in, Conn," she called quietly and without turning her head. "Tell me why you had to kill Liadin's little son."

The fair-haired young Tanist entered the cell with his sword drawn.

"For the same reason that I must now kill you," he replied coldly. "The plot was more or less as you have described it. There was a slight difference. I was the leading spirit. Liadin and I were lovers."

Liadin had begun crying softly, realising the truth was finally out.

"I wanted my freedom from Scoriath to go with Conn. I knew Scoriath would not divorce me, for he was a man of principles. So

there was no alternative. I had to make you believe that he was having an affair with Irnan”

Fidelma raised an eyebrow in cynicism

“Are you telling me that you did not know that Scoriath and Irnan were really lovers?”

Liadin’s look of startled surprise told Fidelma that she did not.

“Then you did not know that Scoriath would have divorced you had you simply asked him? Or that he remained with you only because of what he considered was his duty to you and his son?”

Liadin stood frozen in horror. Then she stammered: “But Conn . . . Conn said . . . Oh God! If only I had known . . . then all this could have been avoided. Conn and I could have been together without guilt.”

“That would not be so, would it, Conn, Tanist of the Uí Dróna?”

The young man’s expression was sullenly defiant.

“You see,” Fidelma went on, speaking to Liadin, “Conn was using you, Liadin. He persuaded you to work out the plan to implicate Irnan because if I followed your false trail and could demonstrate that Irnan was implicated, or at least was a suspect in Scoriath’s death, then she would have had to relinquish the chieftaincy of the Uí Dróna. A chieftain must be without blemish or suspicion. Who would benefit from that but the Tanist—the elected heir?”

Liadin had turned to Conn in disbelief.

“Deny it!” she cried. “Say it is not so!”

Conn shrugged arrogantly.

“Why gamble just for love when one can take power as well? We laid out the plot as you have deduced it, Fidelma of Kildare. Except for one thing: I also slew Scoriath. And when the child stumbled into the room and saw me, I had to kill him as I must now kill you”

Conn raised his sword.

Fidelma flinched, closing her eyes. She heard Liadin scream. The blow was not delivered. She opened her eyes to find that Liadin was clinging to Conn’s sword arm while Rathend and two warriors crowded the cell to disarm and drag the struggling young man away.

Liadin collapsed into a sobbing heap on the cot.

Rathend was standing gazing at Fidelma with a look of admiration in his eyes.

“So you were right, Fidelma of Kildare. How could you have been so sure?”

"I was not sure. Only my instinct was sure. I was certain that Liadin could not have killed her son but that weighed against my certainty that it was Liadin who set the elaborate series of false clues for me to follow, knowing how they would appeal to my vanity for solving mysteries. I was faced with two conflicting certainties. That meant Liadin had an accomplice, and in that accomplice one could look for motive. I began to suspect Conn when he willingly provided me with the next link about Irnan and the Jewess connection.

"Poor Liadin, even when she knew that Conn had slain her child, she continued to go through with this plot for love of him. A strong thing, this blindness of love."

She glanced compassionately at her friend.

"Only when I realised the width of the palm print on the book satchel was that of a male hand did things make sense. Conn, in setting the murder scene, had to make sure that Liadin had left the clue in its proper place and, in doing so, he left his own clue there. The plan needed my participation to follow the false clues. I was late in arriving here and found that Conn was looking for my coming. At the time I wondered why he was relieved when I arrived."

Rathend sighed softly.

"So Conn persuaded his lover to participate in the crime, making her believe it was all for love while all the time he merely sought power?"

"Liadin is guilty, but not so guilty as Conn, for he played on her emotions, as a fiddler plays upon his instrument. Ah, Liadin, Liadin!" Fidelma shook her head. "No matter how well one thinks one knows someone, there is always some dark recess of the mind that even the closest of friends may never reach."

"She saved your life, though. That will stand in mitigation when she is judged."

"If only Scoriath had been honest with her," Fidelma sighed. "If Scoriath had confessed his affair with Irnan and told Liadin that he wanted a divorce, she would not have been led into this fearful plot."

"It seems that Scoriath brought his own fate upon himself," ventured Rathend.

"He was probably a coward to emotion," agreed Fidelma as they turned from the cell, leaving the sobbing Liadin alone. "Men often are. *Deus vult!*"

"God wills all things," echoed Rathend hollowly. ●

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 110, No. 6, Whole No. 676, December 1997. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription \$33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, \$41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 1997: Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. USPS 523-610, ISSN 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

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DAVID GELLER PUBLISHER'S REP

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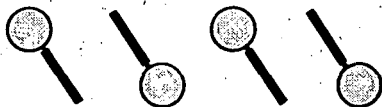
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